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THE DISCIPLE OF A SAINT

BEING THE IMAGINARY BIOGRAPHY
OF RANIERO DI LANDOCCIO DEI
PAGLIARESI, SECRETARY TO
ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

CARE NOT TO PRESENT A FINISHED WORK TO GOD,
WHO IS INFINITE LOVE,
AND DEMANDS FROM THEE
ONLY INFINITE DESIRE.

Letters of Saint Catherine.

THE DISCIPLE OF A SAINT

BEING THE IMAGINARY BIOGRAPHY OF RANIERO DI LANDOCCIO DEI PAGLIARESI

BY VIDA D. SCUDDER

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TO

L. H. S.

" Io mi ristrinsi alla fida compagna :
E come sare' io senza lei corso ?
Chi m' avria tratto su per la montagna ?"

Purgatorio, III.

PREFACE

THE subject of this imaginary biography is not imaginary: not only the existence, but sundry details concerning the character and career of Raniero or Neri di Landoccio dei Pagliaresi are known to history.

A little street in Siena, near the interesting old arch called the Ponte di Romana in the Terzo of San Martino, is still named from the Pagliaresi. This distinguished family was for many generations connected with the University of Siena. The founder was one Jacopo, "legum doctor," comrade of Provenzano Salvani; he lies buried in the cloisters of San Francesco. During the next century the family remained true to its scholarly traditions. In 1327, a time when the fortunes of the Studium were at a low ebb, a Neri Pagliaresi was teaching there. His son, Giovanni, in early life deserted his native town for the University of Perugia, then the centre of the awakening interest in legal studies; but Siena peremptorily recalled him in 1340 from the chair he there occupied, and twenty years later he was teaching law in his own town. In 1365 he served on the City Government, being one of the Twelve for his Terzo. In 1367 he was one of the embassy sent by Siena to Avignon to entreat Urban V. to return to Rome. St. Catherine had therefore good family precedent for sending our hero, doubtless a younger relative of Ser Giovanni, on a like errand.

Concerning the Neri whose story is here told we have no information, except such as is found in the sources for the life of St. Catherine, but this is full of suggestion. He was one of her first disciples, and the earliest of her secretaries.

Through his influence many members of her Famiglia were brought to her, including Francesco Malavolti, Gabriele Piccolomini, Cristoforo di Gano, and, according to one account, Stefano Maconi. Be this last how it may, an exceptionally tender friendship united the two young men. Neri accompanied the Saint on many of her journeys, and preceded her to Avignon, whither she sent him in the spring of 1376 with letters for the Pope. On the return of Catherine's party in the following October, Neri fell dangerously ill at Genoa. The touching story of Stefano Maconi's devotion to him, and the miracle by which Catherine at Stefano's request healed her disciple, are to be read in the "Leggenda." A memorial tablet in the Via Caneto, in the lower part of the city near the Cathedral, still points out the house of Madonna Orietta Scotta where the pilgrims stayed, and the curious visitor may penetrate the vaulted rooms—now used as a storage warehouse—and wonder in what apartment Neri lay ill, and still more where Catherine received Pope Gregory in that mysterious midnight visit, when for the last time she strengthened his wavering conscience for the return to Rome.

During the later part of Catherine's life, we get few glimpses of Neri. But rather less than a year before her death, she sent him with a certain Abbot Lisolo to the Court of Queen Giovanna of Naples, a woman over whom the holy Dominican had always yearned with a peculiar tenderness, and whom at this juncture she was exerting her utmost efforts to hold true to the legitimate Pope Urban VI.; for the Great Schism had now broken out. Of the sojourn of Neri at the Court of this picturesque Sovereign history knows little or nothing; but he may have met there another member of Catherine's Famiglia, the artist Andrea Vanni, who, as has lately been discovered, was in Naples at the time, employed in paintings of which interesting records still remain. At Naples, the tidings of Catherine's "migration from this light" reached Neri, and he returned to Rome in time for that wonderful funeral of which full accounts have come down to us. There he received the last message from his spiritual mother, which was to the effect that his

true vocation was to the hermit life. He obeyed the call, and after a brief return to Naples withdrew from the world. His first hermitage was at Agromaggio, on the banks of the Arno, near Florence, a spot which the present writer has vainly tried to discover. Later he took up his abode outside the Porta Nuova in Siena. If, as seems probable, this was the present Porta Romana, Neri's hermitage would have been very near his old family home. Here he lived until his death, which occurred in 1406 at the ancient hospital of La Scala. The event is chronicled for us by one Luca di Benvenuto, an Olivetan monk, who writes with naïf and incoherent sorrow :

" Dearest Father in Christ Jesus,—My negligence—I need say no more—but I write you with grief and pain, for our father, and our comfort, and our helper, and our refreshment, and our thinker, and our every joy and good—ah ! his gentleness, and holy life, and holy conversation ! Alas, wretched ones, orphans, whither shall we go, what good may we possess, since our blessing has left us ? Ah me, Ser Jacopo, I know not what to do ! Know that our love and our father, Neri di Landoccio, took ill on the eighth of March and could not recover from his cough. Alas ! he passed from this life with all the holy sacraments on the twelfth of March, and was buried by the brothers of Monte Oliveto outside the Porta Tufi. He died in the morning at the aurora, at the dawning of the day. I need not commend to you his blessed soul. I, poor man, am left to distribute everything he had. . . . I, Luca, gave . . . to Monna Caterina, mantellata, three double chest coverings and two old ones, and a pair of stockings and some old worn socks, and the old mantle, and two worn-out feather pillows, a broken bed, and a pair of spectacles, and a shirt, and an old chair. . . . To Monna Nera a pair of old torn sheets. To Fonghino a bag and an old torn towel. . . ."

If we may judge from the possessions he left, the noble Sienese, albeit attached rather to Dominican than to Franciscan doctrine, had effectually embraced evangelical poverty !

In the precious collection of Letters by St. Catherine's disciples, edited by Grottanelli as supplement to the

"Leggenda Minore," the greater number are addressed to Neri. We gain from them the impression that after her death, as before, he was the centre of the little group. We have charming touches concerning his pursuits, as when Giunta di Grazia writes him from Naples concerning a borrowed volume of Dante, or Stefano thanks him for a copy of original verses, and tells how he has had them choicely illumined and given them away. For Neri was a poet of some excellence—author of graceful lauds in praise of Catherine, and of a rhymed Saint-legend. He also probably translated into Italian, at least in part, the Latin "Leggenda" of his blessed mother, written by Fra Raimondo of Capua. It is evident that in his hermit's cell he was not wholly withdrawn from the world and its interests; his friends consulted him continually on all sorts of matters. Indeed, to many medieval hermits, the cell seems to have implied no extreme degree of ascetic seclusion, but the "simple life," disentangled from worldly cares, pursued under strict religious rule, yet not inconsistent with normal human relations, tempered interest in public affairs, and scholarly pursuits. In a hermitage immediately outside a gate of Siena severe separation from the world could hardly have been expected or desired.

Neri was a bad correspondent, however, and constantly grieved and disappointed his friends. Stefano Maconi was of a different temperament, and longed wistfully for fuller intercourse than he was allowed. In a very interesting and even impressive letter, he announces to Neri his assumption of the Carthusian habit. We have letters from Stefano before Catherine's death—harum-scarum, affectionate, and if truth be told gossipy epistles. An extraordinary change has come over him; the present letter, which passes from Italian to Latin and back again, has high dignity and spiritual fervour. But Stefano's loving heart is unchanged. He tries to enter into his friend's views: "And although it were most grateful to me to talk to thee, yet I hold thy peace dear, next to that of my soul. Do not then disturb thyself more than God inspires thee to do, because as thou writest I have firm hope that God by His mercy, and by the

merits of the Blood of the Lamb, and by the intercession of Mary, and of her who has bound us together so closely, will give us grace to meet again in the Eternal Life. 'Ipse concedat qui est in secula benedictus.'" But an eager postscript betrays his heart's desire: "Since I wrote this letter it has been imposed on me by Don Niccolo and Don Jacopo that I should urge thee not to give up coming here, no not on any account, for they have something important that they absolutely must talk to thee about, which can be attended to in less than two days. And thou canst come secretly, and stay here without any one's knowing it. So be sure to start at once."

We do not know whether Neri obeyed this summons, but we do know that again and again he left letters from his friends unanswered till they reproached him with sorrow. Another letter from Stefano suggests the explanation: "I have marvelled indeed, not without some bitterness, over thy cruelty to me in not writing to me for I think fully two years, although I have written to thee many a time. Now thou writest me through Leocino that thou hast been wholly beside thyself ('tutto alienato'). I am obliged to believe it from thy behaviour, although neither this excuse nor any that I made to thee for myself satisfies me at all. But I force me with sweet sighs and tears as much as my infirmity permits, to follow the very wise advice of the Psalmist, where he says: 'Delectare in Domino,' etc. So, if I ever took joy or consolation in any creature, now I wish to seek for all in God alone, and to hold my spirit still." Stefano, as is not unusual in such cases, is more absorbed in his grievance than in his friend's sufferings; but we, reading between the lines here and elsewhere, may discover that Neri, finest soul perhaps among Catherine's disciples, was afflicted by what in modern parlance we should call religious melancholia. Perhaps his illness at Genoa was somewhat of this nature; at all events, we gain from the records by indirect means a clear image of his inner life, and find ourselves in the presence of a character rarely dowered to attract affection, yet constantly shrinking a little, in silent melancholy, from the love it craved.

Our most sacred evidence as to the personality of the man whose early life we have tried to reproduce is, however, to be found in the little group of letters addressed to him by Catherine. There are about a dozen, familiar motherly notes, quite different from the elaborate documents she was in the habit of despatching, full of delicate tenderness for a soul evidently suffering in no common degree from self-torment. "Confusion of mind" is the very modern difficulty from which, with her accustomed vigour and more than accustomed gentleness, Catherine constantly tries to rescue her disciple. "Use the light thou hast, in order that perfect light may grow in thee," she writes: "Eagerly plunge thine eye into that abyss of truth, the love of God: so shalt thou come to supernatural light, to the perfect love for thy Creator, and affection for thy neighbour." And again: "Thou knowest that confusion entirely contradicts the doctrine which has always been given thee. It is a leprosy that dries up soul and body, and binds the arms of holy desire so that one can achieve nothing. It makes the soul unendurable to itself, disposing the mind to inner struggles and all kinds of fancies. It takes away supernatural light and darkens natural light. And so the soul falls into great infidelity, because it does not hold to the truth of God, that God created it to give it Life Eternal. So with living faith, with holy desire, and with firm hope in the Blood of Christ, let the demon of confusion be defeated." But this and the other letters of the great Saint to her sad-hearted disciple may be read at length by whoso will.

It is clear at one point that Neri has been all but overwhelmed by some catastrophe which has befallen a fellow disciple. "Do not fear," writes Catherine to her "dearest and sweetest son," "lest God permit in thy case what He permitted in that other." It is natural to relate this allusion to two letters, addressed to Neri by "one who has no name." They are brief, tragic human documents, with that note of actuality which wrings the heart and defies the ages. "To Neri, my dearest brother of all the friends and servants of God," writes this unfortunate: "Although many a time thou hast sent to me greeting and comfort, to me who was

thy very true brother, for a long time I have known myself exiled from the book whereon I so sweetly fed, wherefore I no more count myself friend of thee or of thy dear brothers and friends. Therefore marvel not if I have not written to thee. But I have wandered so far from the true way that I judge it impossible I should ever return or find a place of repose. And this has happened to me because I drove the light from my soul. I have no longer hunger for any good thing. I put no beginning nor end to this letter, because it is not in me. I do not sign my name to it, for I know not what my name may be. God grant thee grace and perseverance, and a good end." The biographers of Catherine have connected these letters with a mysterious and unhappy figure, which appears in the legend only to disappear. It is that of an unknown priest or Religious on whom, for his sins, was placed the doom of a carnal passion for the holy maid, a love which, repulsed with horror, turned to hate and led to strange excesses. The tradition which connects this figure with the letters written to Neri, and with his own sufferings over the fate of some one near to him, has been followed in this book in the lightly-sketched figure of Gualtiero.

So much concerning the subject of this biography is known to history, or immediately suggested by the records. For the rest—

> "There's nothing in nor out of the world
> Good, except Truth; yet this, the something else,
> What's this then, which proves good, yet seems untrue,
> This that I mixed with truth? . . .
> Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?"

Out of the past appears the man we seek. And if the imagined figure—sorrowful, shadowy, clinging with tenacious loyalty to St. Catherine in her high uplifted radiance—has been at times interpreted in terms of the spiritual quest of modern days, be it remembered how strangely moods recur and problems are reset, in that mighty spiral sweep of the ages which, as we trust, is carrying the race upward.

In few periods can religious experience have been more full of pain, more full of life, than in the last quarter of the

fourteenth century. A great struggle was in progress, and, as usual, the combatants fought in the dark. Organized Christianity was in a special sense on trial. The Church, stained by scandals worse than any our own day can show, tolerated, but hardly enjoined the practice of the Christian ideal. The defeat and suppression of the Spiritual Franciscans, early in the century, had left her as a political institution, chiefly anxious to preserve her own prerogative. The Babylonian Exile and the Great Schism were symptoms, not causes, of the curse of worldliness which had fallen upon her. In the next century was to begin that great experiment with looser forms of organized Christianity, already prophesied by the writings of Wyclif. That experiment we may be said to-day in a sense to have outlived. Protestantism, despite the great things it has wrought, does not to a thoughtful mind materially alter the nature of the problem which still confronts us : the question whether organized Christianity as encountered in history, does in verity so express a divine and supernatural life as to have claim on the allegiance of men. Never was there a period when that question seemed to answer itself in the negative more emphatically than in the fourteenth century. Devout souls found personal escape in varying ways. Some took refuge in heresies ; others fled in desperation from the Church as from the world, seeking in recluse peace the welfare of their own souls.

There was a woman in Siena who had known that temptation and overcome it. From her earliest youth, the impassioned devotion of Catherine Benincasa had been given to the "Sweet Bride of Christ"—the Catholic Church in which, to use her own fine phrase, she beheld "the universal body of all who share the light of holiest faith."

> "For years through, sweetest of the saints,
> In quiet without cease she wrought,
> Till cries of men and fierce complaints
> From outward moved her maiden thought ;
> And prayers she heard, and sighs toward France :
> 'God send us back deliverance !
> Send back Thy servant lest we die !'
> With an exceeding bitter cry,
> They smote the sky.

"Then in her sacred saving hands,
She took the sorrow of the lands,
With maiden palms she lifted up
The sick time's blood-embittered cup,
And in her virgin garment furled,
The faint limbs of a wounded world.
Clothed with calm love and clear desire,
She went forth in her soul's attire,
A missive fire."

Under the leadership of Catherine, there gathered in Italy a group of people, loyal to death and worse than death to the Catholic ideal—aware as earnestly as any ascetic in his cell that to live near to the Heart of God is the end of all earthly striving, but unable to rest till they had converted the Church into a social power for righteousness. Any sensitive person belonging to this group would have suffered greatly, especially if brought into familiar contact with the ecclesiastical happenings of his day. Should such a man go to Avignon, where the secular spirit of the Renaissance, serenely co-existent with conventional Christianity, was replacing spiritual fervour by enthusiasm for intellectual and æsthetic values; should he go to Naples, where the seductions of the flesh were seen in their fairest form, might he not know some such mental history as is outlined in this book?

It will be noted that the subject of this biography is not especially concerned with questions concerning the fundamental truth of Christian dogma. In this, he is a man of his time. For despite the fascinating story of medieval heresies, the middle ages were really ages of faith in so far that broadly speaking, they assumed Christianity as a divine revelation. Thirty years ago, the indifference of the hero to theological issues might have robbed such a book as this of all interest for the few readers likely to care for it. Perhaps this is less the case to-day; for the mid-Victorian preoccupation with questions of dogma in the abstract, is yielding to a more intimate sense of the relation of dogma to life. Agreeing more and more with the iterated assertion of the agnostics of the last century, that it ill becomes poor man to dogmatize, we are yet paradoxically aware that dogma in some form is an inevitable and permanent expression of con-

sciousness. And the conviction grows that the final test of any doctrine is in its transforming or creative power, as manifest in the social order and in individual life. Therefore questions concerning the relation of the Church to Society take precedence to-day in most troubled minds of theological speculation. Christianity as a historic religion must be judged by its effects in history, and in contemporary life.

So we draw near, after a wide-circling journey, to the attitude of St. Catherine's day, and our minds are brought close to her own. Perhaps our reversion to this attitude explains in part the instinctive modern sympathy for the Middle Ages, which began, it may be, with simple enthusiasm for their romantic aspects, but is surely deepening into a sense of spiritual fellowship. It may not be without interest to follow the imagined experience of one mind, itself a "child of process," at a time when organized Christianity seemed to deny its own fundamental assertions, while yet it achieved what no other power in history could have accomplished, in producing the purity, the passion, the spiritual glory of Catherine Benincasa.

The study of St. Catherine in this book must not be taken as an attempt at a complete portrait. It may be questioned whether a romance should venture to present a great historic character as its central figure; but it may surely venture to show such a character as an influence in another life. Many traits in Catherine's personality, many dramatic events in her stormy story, find here scarcely an allusion. But the study, so far as it goes, is at least reverent. It clings close to the records, and hardly a phrase or episode is introduced without authority.

For the slender thread of love-story that runs through the book no such claim can be made, such matters not being treated in the authentic history of Catherine's Famiglia. The members of this Famiglia were human beings however, and we can hardly go far astray in surmising that they shared the common lot.

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THE PROLOGUE

"God . . . rejoices in seeing the hunger of His creatures for Him."

"Thou shalt find Jerusalem, vision of peace, and therein shall be pacified thy conscience."

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA.

THE PROLOGUE

SMALL Neri clambered like a goat down the shelving green broken by outcropping stones which formed the north-east slope of the hill of the Rocca. His lip was trembling.

"It was a trick! I saw Padre Tommaseo pull the string! And Madonnina winked her eyes, and all the peasants fell on their knees!"

He halted out of breath, and sat disconsolate and cross-legged on a precarious slab of grey rock—all Tuscany, or much of it, outspread below.

"I will never confess to Padre Tommaseo again! Old Cecca cried out: 'I did it—I stole the cheese;' and Gualtiero was crossing himself as quick as he could. Those things are good. But it is not good that Madonnina should be made to wink when she had no thought of doing so."

He heaved a sigh deep as only childhood can heave, and rose, balancing himself in space. Behind him, straight above, the castle of Rocca d' Orcia, its masonry mingled with native rock, cut abruptly into the main curve of the sky. Below, a trifle to the south, a sister castle beneath which a few affrighted houses huddled close rose against the purple mass of Monte Santa Fiora. But Neri was looking out and away, over the sunlit waste lands, grey and palest green, that stretched interminably to a blue horizon.

"Madonna mia, dost thou see the things that are done in thy name? In Siena, thine own city, they do slay each other in the streets. My patrons, Count Agnolino and Count Cione, pray to thee most devoutly before they ride forth to rob. Hearest thou? Seest thou?"

As the boy gazed, the grief in his face lessened; awe,

followed by childish determination, gathered there instead. It was a windless morning. Stillness and sunny space made up the world.

"I think," Neri reflected, very slowly—still poised in mid-air on his rock—"that I shall never go back to the castle. I do not like the castle to-day ; and Siena I like far less. I will find a cave, and live as a hermit there. I will say many prayers—for myself. and Lariella, and Gualtiero, and my patrons, the Counts Salimbeni. And perhaps in time I may see a vision of angels. I should like a vision—very much !"

He peered intently into the depths ot air, and waited, breathless, for as much as ten seconds. Then the dreams died out of his eyes.

"The first thing is to find my cave. It is not likely that the vision will come till I have settled there, and said my prayers, and fasted long, and—and——"

He made a wry face, and letting himself down from his perch, began to scramble merrily enough, exploring all accessible portions of the amazing promontory that forms the climbing base to the castle of Rocca d' Orcia. To north a sheer cliff baffled him ; he rejected the western side also, whence was little to see but near black ridges of forest—instinct telling him, perhaps, that the vision was more likely to occur the more one faced the open heavens. But finally he found what he sought, not far from the spot where he had first been standing. A shelf of overhanging rock formed the roof to a little cave, dark and cool and level, from which the hill dropped sheer again to the river-bed. The boy, discovering the spot, gave a secular whoop of delight, then cocked his head.

"It is a spot most meet for devotion," he remarked sagely. "The castle being immediately over my head, I cannot see it. This is therefore the desert, in all respects like that in which the holy Jerome and those others served God in solitude."

He ran out over the hill-side in growing excitement, and lugging stones as large as he could carry, built in the depths of the cave a little square pile ; then shaped two

twigs crosswise, and placed them upright between the stones.

"My altar!" he said, with satisfaction. "I shall sleep, of course, on the ground. And now for prayer."

He pushed back the wet hair from his forehead, and knelt, clasping his hands.

"Madonna!" he said, "first of all, I thank thee for helping me to find a cell so to my liking; and I hope that thou wilt make ivy grow across the entrance, for thou knowest I am fond of ivy. And now I pray thee to help me to pray well to thy sweet Son, who died for love of us on Holy Rood——"

It was very still. The hot sun shone into the cave, and bathed the small hermit with a pleasant warmth. The fragrance of crushed thyme was in the air.

"Gesù — Amore," murmured Neri, "Gesù — A— mor—e——"

A little bird hopped upon the altar. Neri did not move. The bird fluttered nearer, close to the bowed head; there was no stir.

But this hermit of eleven years was much in earnest. He roused himself with a start, and the bird flew away.

"The temptations of the flesh are already upon me," sighed the boy. "Well, one knows how they were conquered by the blessed Antony."

He left the cave, and returned with a bundle of white heather, bristling stiff. He bared his little body. Very solemnly he made on breast and brow the Holy Sign; then, kneeling, lifted the brush. . . .

A breeze was stirring. It raised the child's curling hair into two crests on either side of the temple. The sun shone full on his brown naked body. Almost he might have seemed a little faun, a wild hill creature, astray in Christian centuries. But the light touched the cross on the altar to dusky gold, and Neri's face was that of a child angel gazing on the Passion.

He did not falter, but his look aged as the moments passed. Between the blows unflinchingly dealt to back and shoulders came murmured words of psalms and hymns.

When he judged the hour of noon to have come, he paused from the discipline, and fluted sweetly the hymn of Sext:

"O God of truth, O God of light,
Who orderest time and change aright,
Brightening the morn with golden gleams,
Kindling the noonday's fiery beams,

Quench Thou in us the flames of strife,
From passion's heat preserve our life;
Our bodies keep from perils free,
And give our souls true peace in Thee."

The Office over, he knelt absorbed once more in prayer, and his clearing face showed that prayer led into joy.

The westering sun had long left the cave when the boy anchorite rose from his stiffened knees, and, turning, faced the world.

"Now it is time for the vision," he whispered, gazing out, desire in his eyes.

The wind and clouds had risen. Vast masses of vapour bowed over the summit of Monte Amiata, and turned its snow-fields to sinister grey. The Rocca, too, was in shadow; but on the mighty plain, an opal that had renounced its fires, the deep blue racing gloom, though swiftly on the increase, was broken still by tracts of dazzling light. The scene was indeed one of visionary grandeur and glory; but no Holy Mother gathered the azure radiance around her for a garment, nor were the sweeping clouds transformed into the wings of great archangels before Neri's longing gaze. And as he waited, an-hungered for the open heavens, the spirit of the child grew heavy within him. Doubtless the afternoon chill, touching unheeded his naked body, had something to do with the cold that invaded his soul.

"Jesu, why wilt Thou not grant me a vision?" prayed Neri. "Why dost Thou never grant it, although I pray and pray, and use the discipline? Thou knowest that I would rather have a vision than play with Lariella all day; yet does it never come. *Oimè!* is my soul too blind with sin, dear Lord? Lord, is it, perhaps"—fear was creeping over the child's spirit—"perhaps not Thy will that I should be a hermit, after all?

Padre Tommaseo has forbidden me to use the discipline. He is not good : he took Our Lady's image in vain ! Yet he is Thy priest ; I am bound to him in holy obedience. Ah, sweet Lord, dost Thou see the sins of Holy Church ? I know not whom I may follow, and Thou dost not come to me. By Thy Cross and Passion, deliver me from confusion of mind !"

The hermit was sobbing now—not noisy sobs, but low and deep. Painfully he turned away from the outspread glory. It was dark and chill in the cave. He wrapped his cloak around him, lay down before his altar, and pillowing his cheek on his arm, fell asleep shivering. And now the fauns might have him for playfellow if they would ; but if elfish heads with sprouting horns bent over him, Neri knew nothing of it. Such was not the vision which he craved.

* * * * *

He awoke, chilled through, and stepped to the entrance, scrutinizing the ground.

"The ravens have not brought the bread," he yawned ruefully, "and there is no tame lion anywhere in sight. And it is going to rain in a minute. *Oimè !* but I am cold, and hungry too !"

He dressed hastily. The plain was all black now, the far hill ranges to the north and west lost in thickening darkness.

"Lariella will be dreadfully worried about me," he reflected. "I think I will put off being a hermit any longer. Ah, there's the rain !"—for the mountain storm had broken into descending torrents, while the wind roared loud. "There are usually — devils — in hermits' cells." Neri shuddered, glancing sideways into the depth of the cave. "Devils there, storm without — which is worse ?" He stood for a few moments hesitating, shivering, then crying, "The rain is best !" climbed hurriedly around his shelving rock, and out into the tumultuous air.

The tempest was brief as sharp. By the time the boy had reached the foot of the high castle wall, the sun was shining golden through a cloud-cleft. From beneath the

dripping shelter of a group of ancient hawthorn-trees, laden with foamy blossom, a little girl ran out.

"Neri! I was looking for you when the rain began!" she cried. "Are you very wet? Why do you move as if your shoulders hurt? Where have you been all day? Nobody missed you but me, and I never told. Gualtiero was so scared by the miracle that he confessed he had fought Marco with a knife and upset Monna Grazia's chestnuts. Were you scared too?"

"I will tell you something, Lariella," said Neri—"if you won't tell Gualtiero."

And, reaching on tiptoe—the girl was a trifle taller than he, though a year younger—he whispered in her ear.

Her laugh rang out, gleeful and sweet to hear.

"The old rascal!" she said. "No, I won't tell Gualtiero. It is excellent for bad little brothers with quick tempers to believe such things. But ah! won't I tease the padre!"

"No, no, Lariella," protested Neri, sadly shocked.

And then the fun caught him, and he too laughed merrily.

"What stuff it is—all that!" scoffed she—"the lights and the incense and the long, long Offices and the silly peasants! I don't care for any of it, Neri. This is what I love—oh, look!"

A great rainbow was spanning the distant gloom, turning Montepulciano, on its distant hill, to a little emerald town. The sun, striking from behind on the blossoming hawthorns, changed their snows to transparent fire. The girl stood on tiptoe beneath them, reaching up one slim arm to caress the flowers. The glow of the sun fell sidewise on her lovely face. She looked down on him with slanting, half-closed eyes.

"This is what I love—this—and you, Neri," said she.

Neri was suddenly dizzy with the joy of life.

"Lariella!" he cried.

She was half dancing, half swaying, as she waved the wet branch in her hand.

"You are not to call me that baby name any more!" she said imperiously. "You are to call me my true name—Ilaria! Ilaria! I love my name; it is full of joy, as I mean

to be, all my life. When I am big, I shall go where joy is to be found. And wherever I go, you must come. Do you hear?"

"I, when I am big," Neri confided timidly, "shall, as I think, make verses. Probably I would rather do that than be a hermit. I know I should like it better than robbing caravans on the Maremma. Yes, I shall make verses. And perhaps they shall all be about you, Ilaria—such as Messer Dante wrote about the Lady Beatrice."

"That will be charming!" assented the girl mockingly. "And shall you run away from me all day when you are big? But hurry home now to Countess Bianchina: you will be ill unless you get dry."

PART I

"Confusion is a leprosy that dries up body and soul, and binds the arms of holy desire. It makes the soul unendurable to itself, disposing the mind to conflicts and fantasies; it robs the soul of supernatural light, and darkens its natural light; then with living faith and holy desire let the demon of confusion be defeated."

"The humble soul endures a restless mind with more reverence than a quiet one."

"Most beloved son in Christ Jesus, I summon you to enter, through most ardent charity, a sea that is peaceful and profound."

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA.

CHAPTER I

THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE

Raniero, son of Landoccio, of the family of the Pagliaresi, leaned against the parapet of the broad wall encircling the decayed fortress of Belcaro, his eyes resting on the clustered towers of Siena, that overran a space of billowy hills to eastward. Gloomy thunder-clouds were massed low in that direction, but light from the west shone clear, and the air of the late June afternoon was delicate. Suddenly the many constructions of the town—the budded lily stalk of the Mangia tower, the fresh black and white of the Duomo—gleamed out in startling brilliancy, a solitary sunlit region amid the dark sweep of sky and country. He saw a faerie city, small from distance, as if seen in the crystal of a magic sphere, yet perfect in each radiant detail.

"It looks like Jerusalem, vision of peace," sighed the young Tuscan. "And we have fled from it because it is a city of anguish!"

His gaze, following to the right, lingered on the faint uplands of Monte Amiata, the country dear to his childhood. He had spent more than one summer there with his cousins, Ilaria and Gualtiero Orlandini, in the twin castles under the shadow of the great mountain, owned—though at this time with uncertain title—by the noble Counts Salimbeni. Orphaned in babyhood, the child had felt certainly as much at home in the castles of wild Val d' Orcia as in the city house that bore his family name. How vivid had been the brief periods spent in the old fortress swept by great tormenting winds! They came back to him now, as he watched

the purple summit of Monte Santa Fiora emerge slowly from the thick dusk of the passing storm. How glad he had always been to exchange the rich loveliness of the country he was now overlooking for that loneliness and savage peace! He had endured his winters in Siena—proud, beautiful, turbulent town, exulting, even amid the agonies of ceaseless civic strife, in her splendid recent expansion of building and the arts. Even as a child, he had shrunk from the abrupt blending in his fellow-townsmen of a violent and contentious spirit with an almost effeminate sense for all that was most subtly beautiful and fine. At the Rocca the fierceness of man had been less painful, because, as it were, a part of the very landscape; all had been harmony, though of a sombre cast. He strained his eyes to find the hill towns on the Orcia plain. Longing filled him to see them as of old—Montalcino, San Quirico, Corsignano, Montepulciano, Radicofani—fretting the skyline at dawn, like islands in a vaporous sea, above the dazzle of white mist that filled the plain. A man might be predacious in that country, as were his patrons, the Counts Salimbeni; he might also easily turn ascetic—Raniero's lip curled a little—or he might become, perchance, a dreamer and a poet. One thing in presence of the bleak outspread world he might not be—that was, light-minded.

He roused himself with a start, returned to the present, and faced westward. Here a pile of grey buildings, rising among thickly-wooded hills, were barely to be discerned under the shadow of a passing cloud.

"Peace is with the hermits of Lecceto," he sighed. "In the sunlit city, plague and strife. Surely Gualtiero has chosen well—and yet——"

A breeze, blowing up from the garden, bathed him in the fragrance of roses. He shuddered and paled a little.

"Here roses and revelry," he murmured; "and yonder, in the town—the stricken lie unburied in the streets. One hears that many priests have fled. If the ministers of the Sacred Blood turn from these horrors to their ease, why not we—why not I?"

"Poet and master, hail!" called a deep voice below him.

Raniero looked down from the now smiling country into the rose-garden, girdled by the wall on which he stood. The bushes were heavy with blossoms; they drooped over the grassy walks, even beneath the occasional shadow of a sharp black cypress; they clambered up the face of the fortress villa, and mingled with the ivy upon the opposite sweep of wall. The place was flooded with that golden level sunlight which, more than any other phase of the day, creates in the beholder the illusion of unreality. For not in the midnight dark, but where radiance is warmest and intensest, are spirits most naturally expected by the sensitive mind.

"Poet and master, hail!"

Where the shining was most translucent a man in middle life stood looking upward. His brows were laurel-crowned; his white mantle, edged with broad purple bands, caught sun-glamour in its folds. Raniero gazed at him gravely.

"Cæsar, all hail!" cried he. "Where hast thou left thy bonds?"

"I go to assume them," the shade replied. "But first I bear to thee a message from high Jove. He says that, with all goodwill, he cannot pull alone the car of Amor, who is a lusty youth, and refuses to use his wings. And he asks you, Who among gods or men shall be his yoke-fellow?"

Gaiety had leaped into Raniero's face. "It is a thousand pities," he called down to the other, "that we could not follow the design of Messer Francesco, and have the car of Amor borne by four white chargers. But the garden is too small; and, moreover, I have set my heart on having the Triumph parade the summit of the walls. Therefore invention is needed. Let me see. I think Pluto, god of the under-world, will best help his royal brother."

"So we all thought," remarked Cæsar. "But you know that our friend Pluto is never of an obliging disposition. He refuses to waive his right to march beside Proserpina."

"Ah!" frowned Neri, thoughtful.

"You must decide quickly," said the other. "You know that our host, Ser Nanni—otherwise Jove—is quite capable of making a quarrel out of a revel."

"Cæsar, do you be yoke-fellow to Ser Nanni," said

Raniero. "So the father of gods and the founder of empire shall be seen dragging together through history the car of that wanton boy."

"So be it!" assented Cæsar, executing an unimperial caper. "I am ready for anything. Come, Neri," he added, "do not stay here by yourself. Join the revels you have planned."

Neri—or Raniero—shook his head merrily. "It is the Triumph of the poet Francesco Petrarca that we are to show forth to-night, not mine, Gabriele, as I have already told you. I want to watch the procession pass along the opposite wall against the sky." He clasped his hands, his eager face full of glee.

Cæsar withdrew, welcomed by sounds of laughter from an inner courtyard ; but Neri was not long left alone, for presently Proserpina, lithe and languid, came gliding through the sunlit roses, herself the Queen of Blossoms, her golden hair flower-crowned, her up-gathered skirts full of rainbow blooms. She moved swiftly without seeming to do so.

"Neri!" she called appealingly, and also imperiously, as she approached. "Neri! come down."

"Yes, Ilaria," he answered, but stood for a moment at gaze, making no sign to stir.

A new light was in his eyes. She stood below him, half in sun, half in shadow, her long neck and bosom bare, her arms in tight sleeves of flower-embroidered gauze.

"But come!" she repeated.

And he ran around the wall to the descending stair, and presently was by her side.

"I came to ask you"—her breast was fluttering—"to stay near me, later, when the pageant breaks. I am afraid of the Rinaldini."

"Yet you chose to play Proserpina." Neri's voice was a little constrained. "You knew that Bernabo Rinaldini would be your companion in the pageant. Moreover"—there was now a little note of teasing in the tones—"I told you that a person who had bleached her hair could not fittingly take the part of the Lady of Shadows."

Ilaria pouted.

"I liked the story—Queen of the magic Under-world, and Queen of Blossoms, too," she said.

"Intercourse with Bernabo is the price you pay for these privileges," he returned.

She looked up at him, then dropped her full eyelids of a sudden.

"Why should I fear, when you are by?" asked she.

Something clutched at Neri's throat.

"All that I am is ever at your service," he answered. "Tell me why you shrink from Bernabo Rinaldini. Is it that he is an enemy to your house?"

She arched her eyebrows.

"It is not because he is an enemy, but rather the opposite, that I would avoid Messer Bernabo," was her low reply.

"He woos you?" asked Neri angrily.

Ilaria nodded, laughing.

"You have no cause for wrath that I can see. And yet, I would rather have you near than far. He is a violent man, and he woos me violently. Moreover, he has heard"—she spoke with some reluctance—"of the failure of the negotiations for my new marriage with Stefano Maconi. He seems to take it in very evil part, and to be incensed against Messer Stefano. 'Do not fear,' he said just now, and his eyes glowered; 'he shall see that an enemy can avenge the slight wrought by an ally. You shall have full redress.' But I seek no redress, Neri."

A shadow as from some unseen cloud swept over her face.

"You seek no redress, Ilaria?" Neri queried, with gentle gravity, yet with some eagerness.

"Redress? No; but forgetfulness!" The cry was short and bitter.

She turned, and a long low ripple or musical laughter, with a heart-break in it—or so Neri thought—lingered after her as she hastened toward the revels; the tension in his thought passed into an imaginative excitement as he watched her.

"Great is Amor, our lord," he reflected dreamily.

> "'Mansueto fanciullo e fiero veglio, . . .
> Ei nacque d' ozio e di lascivia umana,
> Nudrito di pensieri dolci e suavi,
> Fatto signore e dio di gente vana.'"

He turned and climbed once more to his post of vantage; and now the pageant of the "mansueto fanciullo" began to gather in the garden, in guise as conceived by Petrarch not many years before, and by Neri adapted for performance.

The light triumphant car was of seeming flame, and high within it, standing apparently upon a golden ball, was the young Lord of Terrible Aspect: not such as Dante beheld him—gracious and pitying, one whose thraldom shut no one from the upper heavens—but lovely in cruelty, as Petrarch knew, famished for tears, born of human lust and languor, the god of a vain people. Blindfold he was, rose-garlanded; his feet, seeming bare, ended in golden talons, as did likewise the hands that wielded the bow. In portraying this medieval God of Love—so different from the playful Cupidon of the Romans, so like yet unlike the far more inscrutable Eros of the Greeks—Neri dei Pagliaresi had probably been guided not only by the verses of Petrarch, but also by memories of a figure in the lower church at Assisi, driven shrinking toward the Pit by Giotto's grave angels of penance. The part was taken by a boy who held him haughtily, lording it well over his followers. Jove and Cæsar, heavily chained, dragged the car onward, with Samson to give a push behind. As they emerged from the inner courtyard, the sun was half-way set behind the fortress wall. The last sad level ray—that half-ray, lingering but an instant, which ever seems to shine upon us from the under-world—struck from behind full upon the brows of Amor, causing the red roses of his garland to glow as with inward fire.

"Ah!" breathed Neri, leaning forward excitedly, "that was better than I planned."

And now the procession moved on, circling three times the little garden. The Roman Emperors preceded the car, arrayed according to the medieval idea of classic dignity. And, indeed, these dark Sienese might well have been ancient Romans, the Latin strain, more persistent in Siena than anywhere else in Tuscany, being clearly visible in their strong cast of feature. The gods of Olympus followed, in attire wherein the gayest fantasy of the times had had its graceful way;—the blond Apollo; Juno, frowning jealous at

the bowed figure of her lord; Mars with Venus; and Pluto, his harsh face rising over folds of sombre purple, beside his magically fair Proserpina. And after these a group of languid lovers of all ages, enchanters and victims—Orpheus, Atalanta, Polyphemus, Pompey, David, Jason and Medea, Numa and Egeria, Menelaus scorned of Helen, Lancelot and Tristram, Iseult and Guinevere. Bound by great ropes of blossom or chains of tinsel, they moved sadly, crushed and sighing, behind the chariot of the King of Sighs. And around that chariot gathered fantastic shapes clad in floating dun garments, their faces concealed by grey masks on which the artist had stamped an expression, now of wild dismay, now of grinning triumph—the Dreams and Errors and wan Delusions whom Petrarch figured as closest companions of the lord of the mortal race.

In the midst of this dusky group the fiery chariot of Amor rose with startling effect. The delight of the artist overflowed Neri's heart.

"Truly," he sighed, "the whole pageant is most well conceived—thanks to Messer Francesco—and to me!"

The sun was gone, but it seemed as if the myriad roses had flung their hue up into the heavens. Sky and earth were one flush, and the afterglow bathed the revellers in radiance.

"All the world's a rose," panted Neri. "Not Dante's rose—the convent of white stoles. Nay, but a better thing—Petrarca's rose—and mine!" and a "wan Delusion," passing directly below, flung up its arms and groaned.

For these medieval folk, gathered from Siena's choicest, threw themselves into the pageant with the dramatic impulse native to their place and time. Incited by the tragedy from which they had escaped to throw aside conventions and restraint, the occasion probably meant to many of them, as to Ilaria Caselli, the rejection rather than the assumption of a disguise: the free expression, through the imaginative forms so natural to them, of the allegiance to passion in which their life was passed. Each acting his part, they moved slowly through the garden, Orpheus gazing wildly back in search of white Eurydice, Circe chanting low spells, Tristram touching his harp-strings, his eyes upon Iseult, and

all at will sighing and moaning, pointing in desperation to the chains that bound them and the arrows that transfixed.

Presently they gathered around the fountain, which in the centre of the little space sent its shaft up into the twilight; and Tristram, stepping to the side of it, began singing, with slow intervals, almost like a church chant:

> " Al qualunque animale alberga in terra,
> Se non se alquanti c'hanno in odio il sole,
> Tempo da travagliare è quanto il giorno:
> Ma poi ch'il ciel accende le sue stelle,
> Qual torna à casa e qual s' annida in selva,
> Per aver posa almeno infin all' alba."

It was the first sestina of Petrarch, artificially lovely in its intermingling of the imagery of night and of the dawn. Orpheus and Circe followed, singing one by one those great canzoni, which struck the ears of men with a music new yet charged with echoes or much that had gone before. Nor were singers or listeners aware that even as they sang these songs of love and longing, Petrarch, the first singer, claimed by the Triumph, no longer of Amor, but of Mors, lay dying among the Euganean hills.

With the cadence of the last stanza the glow had faded, and the revellers moved toward the wall opposite that from which Neri was watching. One by one they disappeared within a low doorway, leading to an inner stair. As they emerged upon the lighted summit each reveller bore a lighted torch, that hardly quivered in the warm evening air. A moment's confusion, and the entire pageant, in single file, began to advance against the dusking sky, in which, low in the west, a crescent moon gleamed strangely. Above the garden they moved, above the far dim world, not earthly men and women in seeming, but phantoms of the air. The car of Amor had been illumined from within, and the red light streamed upward over the limbs of the young god, and struck with almost ghastly effect the grey faces and garments of the Delusions. The actors were hushed into silence by the unearthly beauty of the scene.

Neri, from across the garden, watched, like Petrarch his master, with eyes " burdened and weary," this triumph of the

inexorable lord. As Proserpina came in sight her face flashed on him by the light of the torch carried by Pluto. It was strangely, yet not quite pleasingly, alluring in its olive pallor below the golden hair wreathed with jasmine stars. The young poet was seized in the grip of sudden terror. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, were passing visibly before him beneath the twilit sky. "Receive me! I am yours!" he cried in his heart; and as, rounding the curve, the procession advanced upon him, the words unconsciously arose in song to his lips. He confronted the revellers expectant, faint moonlight striking full upon his face. They paused an instant, then held out their arms with a welcoming shout, and passed by him one by one. Proserpina, as she came near, threw a flowery chain over his neck, another reveller thrust a torch in his hand; and breathless, dazed, defiant, humbled, Neri was borne along in the train of Amor, the blood throbbing in his brows.

* * * * *

The sun had set when the revellers, having twice circled the walls, descended once more into the garden, and dispersed each at his own will through the demesne. Terraces, illumined by torchlight, afforded ample room for wandering, and the ilex wood which covered the castle hill was open to the more venturesome. The castle itself was at the service of all, and a collation was served within till a late hour. The gay company that at the invitation of Ser Nanni Savini had taken refuge in Belcaro from plague-stricken Siena, had easily transformed the old fortress into a home of pleasure. Tapestries from the Orient had been hastily hung over crumbling walls, sweet rushes were strewn on the floors, innumerable candles illumined the corridors, and lit, more discreetly, the private apartments. Most of the revellers, however, preferred to remain out of doors. Amor, though now unseen, was still the lord of the hour, and his slaves, the Delusions, extended over the whole company their dreamy sway. Daylight selves had disappeared, carrying with them any teasing pricks of conscience, and the greater number of the masquers continued through the night to play their parts without reserve.

Raniero, when he planned the revels, had given no thought to such a continuation of them. He wandered through the grounds with troubled mind, every now and then shrinking, a spectator both unwilling and unwelcome, from dim sights that greeted him in rose-bower or cypress-walk. Yet the setting of beauty rendered his repugnance languid. He was of those who can never be moved by the senses unless at the call of the imagination. Life had ever been to him a little like a masque seen in a dream. But to-night the masque had seemed very truth. The weird loveliness of the pageant just passed, though it were of his own devising, had brought home to him with new poignancy the rich variety in Nature and in human experience, the restlessness in his own heart. Now distaste strove with desire as he wandered aimless.

He had noted now and again a girlish figure flitting around his pathway in an open space where a foaming water flowed. It came out into the starlight, and he recognised white Œnone. She swayed toward him timidly.

"Though Paris be lost to me, are there not other shepherds in the glades of Ida?" Her tones blended with the murmur of the stream.

The idea of temptation was often more potent to Neri than temptation itself. The tumult of sense overswept him, then subsided suddenly. In the faint light Œnone's hair shone golden. He gave a start—he had forgotten the request of Ilaria.

"Ah! but thy Paris will return, fair nymph," he answered courteously. "For the Greek knights have won Troy town at last, and the false witch who lured him from thy side has sailed for Argos."

He turned away from her despondent grace. His steps were aimless no longer. Ilaria was not in the rose-garden, nor could he find her on the terraces, through which the flickering torchlight gleamed. He hastened on into the ilex wood that pressed on one side close to the castle. In the dense shadow two dim figures stood. He knew, without sight, that one of them was his cousin.

"Ilaria!" he called clearly.

She started, took a step toward him, then paused. On her

face he discerned the same dazed, half-bewildered look which he had noted in the pageant.

"Ilaria!" he called once more. His voice had still the same purity of tone as in his childhood.

She came to him slowly, holding out her hands. "Take me away," she whispered.

Then from the deeper shadow stepped out Messer Bernabo of the Rinaldini, his handsome face not pleasant to behold.

"I think, Messer Raniero, that you will find the rose-garden more agreeable than the wood." His accent was imperious, if not insolent.

The poet looked at him coldly.

"I am here at the request of Madonna Ilaria Caselli, the lady whom I serve," he answered quietly.

"A noble servant," sneered Messer Bernabo—"you who allow the insult offered your lady to pass unavenged, who let her hand be rejected by a Maconi, and make no stir, though he who insulted her may be met parading day by day in the streets of Siena. You fear the plague, perhaps? Very well, I am not afraid!"

"I want no vengeance!" Ilaria cried. "Leave me, Messer Bernabo!"

"Nevertheless, had not this marplot come ——" the other muttered significantly; and Neri made an impetuous step forward, feeling for his sword. But Ilaria caught at his arm and hung on it. The two were faintly visible in the starlight. Messer Bernabo contemplated them an instant, tapped with his foot angrily, as a man to whom a new idea has come, and with a long low sound, very like a snarl, vanished into the gloom. Neri turned to his cousin, who had released him. She knew well enough the look on his face—sorrowful, penetrating, commanding.

"Neri, listen!" she said, half sobbing. "Messer Bernabo seeks to kill Stefano Maconi. He has told me all his will, thinking, forsooth, to win my favour. Because Messer Stefano declined the offer of my hand he thinks I should rejoice in his death!"

"And many a woman in your place would feel as he expects," Neri remarked thoughtfully.

Ilaria moaned.

"If I saw Stefano lying at my feet—his white flesh gaping red, his lips set in death—would he love me the more? would the ache in my body be less? To what end this ceaseless violence in which we live? Did the sons of Niccolo de' Salimbeni gain comfort, think you, from throwing my old playmate, the daughter of Gieri di Perolla, over her castle battlements last April? The pain of life cannot be made less by adding more pain. Our lord, Amor, though blindfold, shoots at his will, not ours," she laughed shortly, gasping a little. "Better forget than revenge—better forget—if so we may," said she.

Neri's face lightened.

"We have always felt together," said he. "I too, Ilaria, have slight love for this fierce world in which we live. I too care not for vengeance—at least, on the flesh. The spirit laughs at it."

"I crave my youth," cried Ilaria, unheeding—"my youth, and the joy of life! If one will not give me what I seek, I look elsewhere, if so I may." Her lip trembled. "Why do you look at me so?" she broke forth impatiently after an instant. "Before you came in the wood I saw your eyes, and I see them still in the dark. Join Gualtiero in the monastery, Neri; 'tis the only life for you."

"Dear my lady"—Neri dropped on one knee before her—"I would serve you if I may."

Ilaria looked down on him with a curious expression.

"My cousin-poet, I am not your true lady," she said, half wistful, half mocking. "You have not found her yet. When she is found she will be other than I."

Neri drooped his head. In a clover-leaf at his feet a dew-drop mirrored a star, breaking the light into a thousand tiny shafts. He rose without reply.

"What does the Rinaldini plan against young Messer Stefano?" he asked.

Ilaria laid her hand on his arm and spoke low. Her light fingers were fevered.

"He will kill him on Friday. To-morrow—I mean to-day, midnight is surely passed—he will collect his men,

using as pretext that foolish quarrel at a banquet a week since. Already the Tolomei go armed. On Friday morning he will descend on Siena and join them with his band. Messer Stefano, it is said, is on the point of disarming—at all events, his company is small. As he leaves Mass they will surprise him—— Alas! what can we do?"

"That is a simple matter," said Neri soothingly. "I shall warn him to-day."

Ilaria looked at him, first startled, then terrified; suddenly she caught at his hand.

"To Siena—you!" she cried. "No, no! I cannot have you go! The plague, Neri—the plague!"

He laughed into her eyes.

"Stefano is in Siena," said he. "He faces double peril. Is he not the man you love? Do you not wish him saved?"

"I do not know what I wish," moaned Ilaria; "I would I did. I do not know what I am."

"I shall set forth at dawn," her cousin answered.

CHAPTER II

THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH

WHILE the dawn-freshness still lingered, Neri set forth as he had planned. He passed through the banqueting-room, a close confusion from which all poetry had fled; passed through the rose-garden, a chill delight in which beauty was new every morning; plucked a red rose-bud hastily as he went, tossed it away, gathering a white one in its place, and ran lightly through the castle gate and downward among the ilexes. A thin mist clung around their heavy trunks; the grass was dank with dew. Here the night lingered.

The image of Ilaria was before him as he pressed on. It was often there, for that matter, and usually brought with it, as now, a troubled bewilderment. Raniero in his boyhood, docile to the high imaginings of the Tuscan poets, had thought to find his Beatrice, his Laura, in his cousin—the fine and dainty creature, ill at ease like the young scholar himself in the rough life of the feudal castle, possessed like him with love of beauty and song, and like him consumed by a restlessness tremulous for something not quite clearly understood. That in the one case the restlessness might be reaching upward, in the other downward, Neri was too loyal to surmise. What good days they had known, he and she! The girl, though not sharing his distaste for Siena, delighted in her mountain summers, where she enjoyed a liberty unknown in the city life of a high-born damsel. Together they had watched the play of light on the mountain-slopes, or over the great

faint-gleaming lands within the soft curve or whose farthest blue thought could divine Siena; together the two dark heads had bent over some vellum roll—the great Vision of Dante Alighieri, beloved of Neri, or Lariella's favourite sonnets of one Francesco Petrarca. They had shared the sense of responsibility too, seriously, as young things will; for the girl's little brother, Gualtiero, had been a difficult child, subject to fitful gusts of passion, now religious in character, now extremely the reverse. He bade fair, they feared, to follow in his father's footsteps, and become, like most men around him, a petty fighting noble; Lariella and Neri found not their weakest bond of union in their distaste for the predaceous life.

Well, Ilaria's people had married her at nineteen—a good match—to a man of rank as far superior to her own as that of Raniero was lower. Her marriage was a pain, of course. Neri, well aware that it followed due poetic precedents, found it an excellent subject for verse. After a dreaming boyhood, late prolonged, he had at last adopted the tradition of his family, and betaken himself to the life of a wandering scholar and the study of the law. Only a few months before the Triumph of Amor, he had returned to Siena at last, and renewed acquaintance with his cousins. Gualtiero, poor lad, had not followed the expected path, but was now a Franciscan friar, known in religion as Fra Antonio. A boyish passion for a peasant-girl, a brother stabbed, a sister killing herself over the body in remorseful shame, and the young noble had fled aghast, and taken the vows in a monastery in the hills. This was some years before; he had acquired at this time, it seemed, considerable reputation for sanctity, and had been transferred to a convent near Siena. As for Ilaria—widowed a year past, and her own mistress—Neri found her one of the fairest and most reckless among Siena's pleasure-loving young dames. She had turned into a blonde beauty. The perfectly arched eyebrows, the wide forehead, the pretty curves that had dimpled in girlish days beneath a shadowy crown, greeted him now from a frame of rippling gold; the effect was certainly bewitching. With the increased perfection of her

person went, he soon perceived, a trained and practised instinct for all the graces of life. Of a surety, Ilaria was more charming than ever before.

Too charming, also, alas! too reckless, to remain unwed! He found her re-marriage a chief topic of family discussions, which, as a matter of course, he was called on to share. Ilaria, who, defying conventions, sometimes merrily forced her way into the conferences, jested while candidates from the allied houses in Siena were passed in review.

"There is young Messer Stefano, of the Maconi," said the Countess Bianchina Salimbeni one day; "he will be the head of his house."

Ilaria, for a wonder, did not scoff.

"I have never seen a man of more open forehead," she remarked pensively.

And Neri felt a sudden animosity against Messer Stefano.

He might have spared himself the feeling, however. Negotiations, opened cautiously from the house of the lady, were coolly received by the Maconi, so coolly, indeed, as to amount to a courteous rejection. No one could tell how Ilaria was affected by the matter. She held her pretty head high, yet paled a little, and played her part with perhaps a touch of fever added to her zest in the festivities of the advancing spring. These festivities, however, were doomed to sad interruption, for before the summer was full-blown, a horror, in abeyance for a quarter of a century, but never forgotten in Italy, was renewed, and pestilence swept over Siena.

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Yes, the old spell had been renewed, with a difference, and Neri trembled on the verge of a genuine passion at last. Yet it was not wholly easy even for a dreamer to idealize Ilaria. The mystic reverence which he sought to cultivate toward his lady was constantly interrupted by an impulse of comradeship and protection, through which flashed the allurement of the senses, and an occasional pang of distaste. For this frame of mind he found no pattern in his books. He reproached himself bitterly for it—was reproaching him-

self now, as he sped down the long hill that stretched in uneven rise and fall from Belcaro to Siena. Not that it troubled him to feel within his own love an earthly taint; Dante and Petrarch had known that struggle, and had conquered, not without salt tears. But to distrust the brightness of his lady's image—this, surely, in the annals of high love was a crime unparalleled. He tried to cast the evil thought aside, to exalt at once his love and his ideal. Breathing the morning air, the thing seemed possible. The situation helped, delicate enough to tickle his sense of honour, dramatic enough to absorb fancy. Was he not speeding into peril at his lady's hest to save a rival's life? Add that this rival scorned the lady's love, and that Neri was bound as lover true to hate him for giving pain whom he would hate still more for giving joy, and the tangle of emotions sufficed to tax pleasurably the most adept courtier in Amor's train.

When we are conscious of magnanimity, the whole world is ennobled to our gaze. The Ilaria of the ilex wood grew dim as a fading fresco to Neri's memory. He saw in her stead the little maid of the old castle, whose bright and ready gaiety had seemed to his more despondent temperament a gift of enchanting sweetness—Ilaria of the gentle heart, the most compassionate spirit he had ever known, she who turned away shuddering from sight of wounded bird or beast. Thinking on these things, dubious traits vanished from her image: she shone before his eyes, the piteous lady of his desire, and the devotion for which he longed rose ardent within him. It brought a fullness to the throat—to the eyes a smart, which he coaxed into a tear. He walked on happily. The dark trees which crowned the hill were giving place as he descended to a wood of fresher green. In the grass below cyclamen hung their heads, dew-freighted. The birds were at matins. Through the soft foliage the sky was palest rose.

Then of a sudden the ugly fears that had been squirming below consciousness heaved up their heads, and Neri heard himself cry aloud:

"God! If one's lady of the stars should prove a wanton!"

The uttered words struck cold upon his ear. He had stopped abruptly, throwing his open palm against the rough bark of a tree. The hurt mixed with the sound of his own voice. Invaded by the terror of the fact, he flung himself face downward, pressing his cheek into the wet grass, recalling every too significant word and look of the Proserpina of the night before, thrilled in his senses by her last glance at him, and troubled by a passion he despised. Slowly to the first pain with which the image of his dream-lady faded succeeded another. The little cousin, playmate of his childhood, comrade of his youth—what was befalling her? This pain was sharper than the other, though Neri knew it not; it healed the pang of fleshly desire.

He rose presently, and went on his way with a new gravity. According to his curious wont in concrete experience, his relations with Ilaria became the index to wider questionings.

"Woe's me!" he sighed. "My thoughts when most high are ever most false. They gibe at me—fair devils, hollow within. I dream the thing that is not."

He had reached the top of a lower ridge, from which the towers of Siena, seen through a gap in the trees, rose larger than when viewed from the fortress wall. For the first time the sense of precisely what he was going to meet smote on him. Neri was neither more brave nor more cowardly than most men. He had never seen the plague, but to him, as to all people in his day, it was the image of dread incarnate. The night before his mission had seemed part of the story in which he played his rôle, dim as the star-lit pageant of Amor. This morning it struck upon him with full harsh force. Sobered, invigorated, he stepped steadily downward; there was a man's life to save in Siena—that, at least, was real.

"Bloodshed and pestilence—these are no dreams," he mused bitterly. "In Siena streets the Maconi and the Tolomei are fighting; yonder to southward the Salimbeni ravage the land. All over Italy the free-lance companies lay waste and burn—our good father, the Pope in Avignon not unwilling: on the other hand, behold the rule of Amor

of the cloven foot, who finds, I fear me, as many followers in cloister as in court. If a man seek honour without the shedding of blood, and love without lust, what place for him in Italy ?"

The path, hardly more than a foot-trail, had been lonely; but now a priest came ambling up on muleback, feasting his eyes on the pleasant woodland. At sight of Neri, however, he dropped them on his breviary, and passed without word or sign. An unpleasant thought occurred. Might the man be fleeing from Siena ?

But the sight of the Office-book had opened the door of another chamber in the house of the mind—that mysterious dwelling which always numbers rooms which the owner has never entered, and others closed in long disuse. Neri's early piety had passed into a large indifference. The coarse religion of Padre Tommaseo had caused his childhood a perpetual smart. Growing older, he found in Christendom at large a state of things likely to incline any fastidious mind toward cynicism. The first fervour of the great Franciscan and Dominican movements had long been spent; nothing, unless it were the ill-regulated enthusiasms of heretical sects, had arisen to take its place. A restless Italy, divided against itself, found its most greedy tyrants and eager fomenters of discord in the legates of the absent Pope. In monasteries and convents scandals were almost the order of the day. Noting these things, half carelessly, Neri had lost all instinct to seek satisfaction for the yearning toward perfection, quick within him, in the religious life.

Yet perhaps this life, once lived in sincerity, is never quite destroyed. In some deserted chapel of the mind, forgotten of the conscious powers, the holy rites go on for ever, biding the time of their recall. From his ninth to his fifteenth year Neri had been in the habit—how acquired he could not have told—of repeating, whenever possible, the canonical hours. He had long abandoned the custom, so far as intention went; yet the high words dwelling within his mind blended their music with his thoughts perhaps more often than he knew. And now, as he walked on under the brightening sky in which the rose had turned to gold, certain portions of the

Office of Prime shaped themselves automatically on his lips.

"Deus in nomine tua salvum me fac; et in virtute tua judica me"—through the tumultuous thoughts within shot a faint hint of clarity and ordered peace. "Deus, tu conversus vivificabis nos; et plebs tua lætabitur in te." Neri pushed the unwelcome words aside, annoyed at their persistence. But as the descending way brought Siena once more into sight, the Psalm was still ringing in his mind: "Misericordia et veritas obviaverunt sibi, justitia et pax osculatæ sunt." Bitter irony held him tight; for not in his native town was that embrace likely. Nevertheless, through the jostling images with which he willed to fill his mind, the Office continued to sing in persistent undertones. As he came to the foot of a long hill he had reached the benediction: "Fidelium animæ per misericordiam Dei, requiescant in pace." He sighed, relieved, glad that the thing was over.

Here, in the ravine, a little stream, more than brook, less than river, flowed gently among the woodland grasses. Siena was lost to sight. Neri sat down to rest, and the tingle of active exercise yielded slowly to a delicious calm of nerves and muscles. He found the bread which he had had the forethought to bring with him, and ate and drank. As he rested the light between the great tree-trunks grew from splendour to splendour, and flashed its level glories through the forest, transfiguring the leaves to flames. The sun, risen some time since on the heights, had reached the valley-lands, and in Neri's mind, watching with poet's delight the poet's moment, some far memory of brilliance was stirring and seeking. A pageant, yes; but not that Triumph of earthly love, so fair in the false twilight of the night before, so wizened grey and lustful red in the light of recollection. The sunbeams in the "living forest" are seven candlesticks of gold. What noble elders follow, crowned with fleur-de-lis? What mystic chariot is this, within which rides a lady olive-garlanded, robed in hues of living fire and of the fresh spring grass? Memory found what it sought—the great vision of the Church Triumphant, which blessed the purged eyes of Dante Alighieri in the wood of Paradise. It

saw the dancing nymphs, who in the heavens are stars, encircling heavenly Wisdom—she who is hidden from eyes not yet bathed in the healing waters of death and forgetfulness, but is yet revealed to the heart of her votary by the instinct that cannot lie.

For a moment Neri dwelt, despite himself, on the exceeding beauty of the poet's dream—the Pageant of Righteousness moving through an earth restored; then, fretful, shook the image from his mind.

"It is the old trickster—the sun," he murmured. "He has risen on another day of strife and pain."

He knelt by the brook and bathed his brows.

"I would you were in truth the river of Lethe, little stream," he sighed; "so might I bathe in you, body and soul, and lose all memory of fevered evil past, of the world's sin, and my own."

His mind lost itself for a moment in the thought of what it would be to gaze, made clean and whole, on the face of Wisdom unveiled; then he rose, and pursued his way in dejection, unaware that nor Lethe nor Eunoe might be his who had not yet climbed his Purgatorial Mount.

* * * * *

His footpath struck the main road presently; this wound through an enclosed valley, fairly wide. The world was all awake. Large grey oxen, great-horned, mildly devout of mien, were already at their labours in the near fields and the far—a pleasant sight to Neri always. Now and again they were met on the road itself, drawing a cart within which sat or stood women and children, the men trudging beside. The summer sun, though young in the heavens, already scorched where it fell. As Neri walked steadily on, vehicles became more frequent; foot-passengers, too, were often passed, walking as if in haste, their faces drooped. It struck him presently that in the long stretch of road now visible no single wayfarer, save himself, was bending his steps toward the city. Once or twice he ventured a greeting, expecting the cheery response always natural to the Tuscan peasant, but the silence remained unbroken; nor

was any face raised to his, except that of a young girl who cast a curious, furtive, pitying glance in his direction. He noticed now and then a prostrate figure in the bottom of the cart. Once, after such had passed, a faint, unpleasant odour seemed to reach his nostrils. He argued himself mistaken, and, indeed, the next moment a blossoming vine tangled by the wayside filled the air with so delicious a fragrance that the impression was forgotten. Neri tried to turn his thoughts to the sweet country sights and sounds around him. For a time he succeeded, the spirit of the fertile land through which the slow road winds between hedgerows where the honeysuckle blooms, being, indeed, one of great peace.

Suddenly he became aware of something unnatural in a distant field, a strange disturbance of the accustomed pastoral order. The oxen, driven no more in even furrows by a tranquil master, were roaming at large through the young wheat, trampling it at their will. The sight filled him with dismay. His eyes sought the roadside again, and rested there upon a little heap lying covered in the ditch beneath a flowering elder-bush. Overcoming a curious reluctance, he stooped and lifted the bright edge of the covering. A dead baby lay before him. The face was weirdly old; only the soft hair, unchanged, lay in golden rings on the mottled blue forehead. Neri hesitated, looked around, and stooping began to scoop out a little grave in the loose earth. After an instant a shudder shook him visibly; he abandoned his pious task, rose slowly as if pulled down by some impelling force, and went on his way, his own head unconsciously drooping in the shamefaced fashion he had noted in those he met.

The traffic had thickened. Neri was opposed now to a moving stream of wayfarers, advancing in morose stillness. But on the other side, through the great Roman gate, as many more, he knew, were seeking the stricken city, there to take refuge, though with plague for housemate, from the wild bands of his kinsmen that ravaged the fields and villages of the Maremma. Was the whole world of men thus in flight from the evil known to the peril that waited? In the crowd encountering him was many a monk and priest.

Some walked defiant, head erect ; others cringed within their cowls. The heat was sickening. In unendurable contrast to what he knew the place to harbour, the Campanile of the Duomo, pure in shadow as late snows on Monte Amiata, now soared above the old city wall, to the right, directly overhead. On every face he met was the same look of stricken horror, and this terrible uniformity of countenance produced an effect as of a vision of despair. That slight, unpleasant odour was constant now. He no longer looked at the sides of the road. "Water !" he heard one call in a voice of poignant faint appeal from the ditch beside him. He walked on doggedly. Sick terror, to his rage and mortification, had invaded his whole being.

As he drew near the city gate the outgoing stream had thinned : the exodus would not be resumed till evening brought comparative cool. But a woman, decrepit with age, and swathed in sweeping black, stood supporting herself, with one hand against the wall, in the shadow of the great arch of the portal. The face was hidden. As she bowed in majesty of utter desolation over the dead body of a youth at her feet, the disordered imagination of Neri dei Pagliaresi saw in her that fearful woman, horrible and proud, whom Petrarch had beheld triumphing over Chastity and Love,— the fierce Spirit of Death, full of more than Titanic power, brooding watchful over the entrance to the stricken city.

He stooped, staggered, pressed his hand to his forehead, turned as if to join the travellers faced toward the cool of the hill-country ; then resolutely and blindly, with fear clutching at his heart, stepped through the gate, and stood within Siena.

CHAPTER III

THE CALL OF THE DISCIPLE

WITHIN were all the horrors of the tenth pit of Malebolge. The glare of the sun beat through a faint steady stench that penetrated every joint and marrow. The houses, devoid of any sign of life, opposed a blank reserve to the pitiless day; here and there a body, lying in the public road, now writhed and now was still. Occasional wayfarers stepped past—now with furtive swiftness, more often with bearing impudently bold, and ribald song upon the lips. One such Neri saw—a coarse-faced man, full-blooded, who strode along uttering blasphemies; and in the very midst the disease struck him; he staggered, crawled a few steps, then fell his huge length along the pavement. The next comers crossed the street to avoid the heap.

All but overcome with dizzy nausea, Neri went on, that fear which had clutched his heart at the gate almost a visible presence advancing by his side in the white glare. That he should fear to this point of faintness filled the young poet's soul with a self-scorn not least of his miseries; for he had not learned that only one who walks with fear can walk with courage too. In a sense, he hardly saw the hideous sights among which he was moving. Another sight, left behind, haunted the eyes of memory—a sight pitiable and very small, yet large enough to blot out the streets of the city: a baby's body, with the face of an old man, and purple spots on the breast, lying unburied in a ditch beneath the flowering elder. He prayed that it might vanish, and turned his head stiffly to escape it; but it was waiting for him on the other side.

In odd, impersonal fashion a thought occurred to him: his state of mind was just that which was said to lay a man open to an attack of the disease. Physicians were wise enough even in those days to bid men keep all images of the plague away if they would escape it. It was to such an end that the gay group which Neri had left the night before had sought Belcaro, smothering horror in roses like the folk of Boccaccio; to such an end the roysterers who passed him shouted and blasphemed. Oh yes, Neri understood this well enough—understood that pestilence was dogging him behind. When would it seize him? Where? Yonder, where the sun, pouring down a cross-street, cut sharp across the shade? Or no; that ditch was more likely, under the elder-bush; the honeysuckle tangled with the bush might blow sweet wreaths across his face. Only the ditch was occupied—but by so very small a creature! There would be plenty of room for him too. Perhaps when he discovered the fatal spot on himself he could crawl to one side, beneath that arch which spanned the way half up the hill; he would be less incommoded so, and less conspicuous. He would not like the passers-by to stare. Not that anyone would notice much. If he had not crawled far enough, they would push him to one side—that was all—into the elder-ditch; no, no! the gutter, the gutter in the middle of the street! Oh, the indignity of it, the loathsome publicity! At least, he would try to lie still, to allow his body no contortions, there on the public road. But would his will have power when the agony was worst? When the end had come, and he knew no more, would they throw him into a cart and drag him over the white road, or let him lie where he fell? The baby lay where it fell. He had not buried the baby. How exceeding sick was his head, his stomach! Was not there a thickness under his arm? And he had come scarce five minutes from the gate! Where was he? He must not lose his bearings! Oh yes, in the Contrada dell' Oca: there was the steep road straggling up to the higher part of the town where the palaces were. If once he could get up there, the air might be less foul than here in the dregs of the town. Hurry, hurry!

What—who was that, bent over the writhing figure to the left, which gasped in the last extremity? Only a woman!

Neri paused and looked at her—he knew not why—noticing her white dress and black mantle. As he stood motionless, his terrors ebbed backward, leaving him sane and free. The woman raised her head toward him, showing a pale face, slightly pock-marked, strong in compassion; and sudden quiet, charged with a strange giddiness, took possession of his soul. He saw the whole scene clearly—the three-arched fountain below the hill, the mounting street, the huddled houses, the horrors visible in the white sunlight, hinted in the sharp black shadow; yet peace and joy, as it were a sensible atmosphere, irradiated his spirit. The ecstasy—for it was hardly less—grew as her still eyes met his own.

She held out to him a cup which she had just removed from the bloated lips of the plague-stricken.

"My son," she said, "this poor man thirsts. Yonder is Fontebranda."

Quietly, but still with that deep gladness, Neri moved whither she pointed. To reach the fountain was to pick one's way among the sick, thicker here than elsewhere, fallen one over the other on the shallow steps in impotent strivings to attain the cool gleam and glow beneath the ancient vaults. Neri's feelings were as of one walking through green mountain meadows in the light of dawn. When he returned with brimming cup, the woman was leaning over another sufferer. He gave the dying man to drink, breathing the fetid breath perforce as he did so. Another poor wretch close at hand looked longingly through sunken eyes. Without question or hesitation, Neri made his way back to the fountain.

How time passed he had no idea, as he followed in the footsteps of the unknown woman, imitating her deeds, staining his choice attire, shrinking no more than he saw her shrink from the foulest ministries. Now and again she would disappear within the door of one of the dreary houses near the fountain. He knew that she was gone to care for the sick, who lay, often deserted of their friends, within.

Coming back, she would renew her consolations, giving the sufferers not only physical care, but strong words of comfort, which brought again and again the semblance of a smile to ghastly lips. Neri would himself, it seemed to him, willingly have incurred the sickness, if so such words could have been breathed into his ear. But to him she spoke only once, when he had performed some especially loathsome bit of service to a youth whose limbs were already putrid :

"In this sufferer I behold Christ, who bids me thank thee," she said, bending upon Neri a look of profoundest love.

But when the vesper hour was come she lifted herself, and moved swiftly to where he knelt over one just dead, arranging the limbs in more seemly fashion.

"Go in the sweet and holy grace of God," she said with authority.

"Not yet, my mother," pleaded Neri, scarce knowing what he said.

A smile overflowed her features—the pitying eyes within their heavy lids ; the firm, full, sorrowful mouth.

"And your errand?" she asked, adding quietly : "Upward! To the Terzo of San Martino!"

Neri gazed at her bewildered, then turned, with the docility of a child, and took the indicated road—still in a daze, still throbbing with that mysterious gladness. He did not remember for some distance that he had no clue to the identity of her whom he had obeyed, nor did the fact when remembered trouble him. For he was inclined to think that at last his childish prayers had been granted, and that all day long he had been walking in a vision. Not till later did he realize that his new friend had appeared to know his errand without having been told.

CHAPTER IV

STEFANO MACONI

The plague was less in evidence in the upper part of the city. The Campo presented an almost normal appearance, except that few loiterers strolled beneath the Mangia tower, and in the upper loggie that honeycombed the houses curving around the great place no ladies of the burgher class appeared to take the air, as was their pleasant wont. Near by, in the Via delle Donzelle, rose the grim brick Gothic façade of the Maconi palace, adjoined by a tower of great blocks of stone. Neri knew the region well; the cross street named from the House of the Pagliaresi was not far away. Here, from the time of their founder, Ser Jacopo, "legum doctor," friend of Provenzano Salvani, his people had lived, furnishing a series of distinguished jurisconsults to the University and Commune of Siena. Why had the youngest of the house come hither so seldom and so reluctantly of late years? He asked himself the question, and found no answer ready.

The heir of the Maconi was disarming in his courtyard with the help of a page. Neri was struck pleasantly at once by the bright sincerity of the young man's face. Messer Stefano greeted him with enthusiasm.

"Messer Raniero de' Pagliaresi! It is a good hour that brings you to my house!"

"I thank you, Messer Stefano," replied Neri, with a grace peculiar to him, yet with a touch of reserve. "The hour is surely good for me also, though the reason that gives it me is serious."

"In a moment I am at your service," Stefano rejoined. "I have been riding these cheerful streets armed, all day, and to no purpose," he remarked ruefully. "Not a glimpse of our friends the Tolomei have I had."

"Would you rather it had been to a purpose?" asked Neri, smiling.

Messer Stefano shrugged his boyish shoulders.

"What is the use of carrying about all this weight—to say nothing of staying in the city in time of plague—unless some fighting comes of it?"

Neri laughed out; and at the sound the other laughed too, with a merriment less silvery but more contagious.

"Nevertheless," he went on, sobering a little, "I must confess that my heart is not in this feud; for I can never remember what we are fighting about. I am, indeed, so convinced that no one in either family is happier or more honourable for black looks and red deeds that I intend, with my father's consent, to call my men together after supper, and tell them that we will disband to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow, messere," said Neri, suddenly grave.

Stefano, by this time unarmed, turned to him with attention.

"It has come to my knowledge," said Neri, "that an ambush is prepared for you to-morrow by Messer Bernabo Rinaldini. I am here to give you this information. He purposes to join the Tolomei with his band, and to waylay you as you leave Mass. I would therefore recommend you to stay at home in the morning."

"Stay at home!" exclaimed the other, his face shining. "Not I! But, thanks to your most kindly warning, it shall be a fair fight!"

"I thought you did not care to keep up the feud, messere," said Neri, smiling.

Stefano pondered a moment, looking into his mind as a child might do.

"I have not been bred to arms for nothing," he returned presently. "Perhaps I am not all soldier, for I admit there is something within me which shrinks from seeking a foolish quarrel. But you can hardly expect a man to forego a fight

in self-defence. Clean my arms well !" he adjured the page, his eyes dancing. "Bernabo Rinaldini ?" he added, puzzled. "Why should he wish to mingle himself in this affair ? But supper is at hand, messere. Let the boy show you to your apartment, if, as I trust, you will honour me by sleeping in my father's house. I hope you will do so," he added impulsively. "For some reason, I feel a strong desire for your further acquaintance."

"Gladly," Neri replied. But at the foot of the noble stairway that rose by the well he hesitated and paused. Was he not here to fulfil his lady's will, divined although unspoken ?

"Messer Stefano," said he, smiling with an effort to appear unconstrained, "I can, if you like, enlighten you as to the motives of the Rinaldini."

"Eh, well !" said Stefano ; "Bernabo, after all, never needed any special motives for seeking a quarrel."

"You have asked me nothing," Neri persisted, "concerning the source of the warning of which I am only the bearer."

"I have, as you may surmise, many a question in mind," Stefano answered. "But it is not for me to question a guest, especially one who, like yourself, has faced danger in my service."

"That your to-morrow's fight may be the sweeter," returned Neri, "know that the warning comes from Madonna Ilaria Caselli, my cousin, and the chosen lady of my service." Watching Stefano covertly as he spoke, he did not miss the reddening of the brows.

"I recognise in this deed a lady most generous !" exclaimed the young Maconi gratefully, but with a certain formality. "But how came she to know of the proposal of the Rinaldini ?" he added in a moment, as the other did not speak. "He is enemy to her house as to mine."

There are forces stronger than those of family feuds," said Neri. Perception wakened in Stefano's eyes.

"He woos her ?" he cried ; and Neri, signing assent, saw evidence of feeling which he could not clearly decipher, but in which regret surely had its part in the other's candid face.

"She is the fairest lady I have ever seen," said Stefano.

"And gentle as she is fair," returned Neri, "and lover of all lovely things. The thought of bloodshed is abhorrent to her. But Bernabo Rinaldini seeks to win her favour in ways which his own vindictive instincts commend." He spoke significantly.

Each was aware of the other's consciousness, each too sure of the other's delicacy to feel discomfort; but it was hard to frame sentences aright. Stefano, however, possessed the direct simplicity of nature which can carry a man through any social strait.

"Frank speaking is best," said he. "I understand that the Rinaldini has known of the failure of the late proposal for an alliance between our houses? Am I right?" And as Neri agreed he added: "I recognise, indeed, double cause of gratitude to Madonna Ilaria and to yourself."

"The failure," said Neri, "is cause of regret to me, especially since I have seen you, messere."

Stefano sighed.

"What would you?" said he. "These matters are determined by our elders. I myself was far from averse to the proposals. But——" He hesitated. "The women of my house have always led a sequestered life. My father was privately influenced, I suspect, by my mother, Madonna Giovanna——" Again he paused, frankly embarrassed, then concluded: "I marvel at myself now that I did not press acceptance. Should the proposals be renewed—— But the hour is late, messere; we are presently to sup." And Neri, reluctant to pursue the conversation further, gratefully accepted the break in the talk.

Small wonder if Ilaria loved Stefano Maconi! Pain touched him at the hinted reason for the indifference of the Maconi to the match. But broken negotiations might be renewed. How serve his lady better than by urging them? The memory of her last words to him added perplexity. Weary, bewildered, he could reflect for the time no more.

Messer Currado, head of the house, was, as he found at supper-time, away from home; but formalities being disregarded in the strange conditions of the city, Madonna

Giovanna, his wife, with several of Stefano's little brothers and sisters, were present at the meal. Supper was served in an inner loggia overlooking the court, the ladies of the noble class not caring, like those of lower rank, for exposure to the public gaze. The food, though well prepared, was scant and coarse. Famine, Madonna Giovanna explained—due, alas! to the ravages of the Salimbeni on the surrounding crops—was already pressing hard on unhappy Siena. Matters must indeed be serious, thought Neri, when even a house of this importance was reduced to straits. On his expressing something of the sort, however, she answered with a flush:

"Such fare is not yet absolute necessity with us; but my son and I both find that we can take no pleasure in eating delicately while others want."

It was evidently from the mother that Stefano had derived the sunny graciousness which distinguished him. She thanked him, with emotion, for the warning he had brought her son, and added a word of appreciation for his courage in venturing within the stricken city.

"If Messer Stefano and you, madonna, do not fear to remain in the city, I hardly see why I should hesitate to come thither," he returned, waiving her courtesies.

"I am kept here, as you know, by considerations of honour," said Stefano lightly, "and my mother has refused to leave me. But in this part of the city we see comparatively little of the plague. If one remains within doors during the heats I believe the risk is slight."

"You ran real danger, however, Messer Raniero," said his hostess, "in taking your journey through the noonday, as you must have done to reach here at vespers. It would have been better to start in the early freshness."

"But so I did!" said Neri, forgetting himself. "I left Belcaro before sun-up. The walk was delicious till I approached the city——"

He stopped abruptly, aware of his self-betrayal; but his hosts were too courteous to express curiosity.

"If you entered by the Porta Fontebranda," said Madonna Giovanna, "you must have seen sorrowful sights. The plague is at its worst in that quarter."

"Yes," responded Neri; and then, with a slight effort: "I saw a fair sight there also—a woman of strong and blessed aspect ministering to the afflicted. Can you tell me who she might be? She wore the Dominican habit; her countenance was like that of the angels, but with somewhat in it that angels cannot share."

"Catherine Benincasa," exclaimed Madonna Giovanna—"she whom men call the Mother of Souls and the Blessed One of the People! How comes it that you have not heard of her?"

"I have been much away," answered Neri; "otherwise I should have had the privilege of your acquaintance, madonna. It is only within a few months that I have completed my legal studies."

"Why did you not pursue them at our own Studium?" asked Stefano.

"My uncle, Ser Giovanni, counselled me to work at Perugia," Neri answered. "It has, of course, been the centre for law study during the last century."

Stefano laughed. "That fine gentleman and great jurist never forgave Siena, I believe, for summoning him home," said he. "He always after bore his native city a grudge."

"I bear it no grudge," said Neri. "Yet I must confess that a certain distaste for the place from which I have always suffered had something to do with my long absence."

"It is an inheritance from your grandmother, Messer Neri," smiled Madonna Giovanna. "She was a most sweet, keen-witted lady, but a Florentine, as you know. She never quite forgot Montaperte."

Neri had forgotten the fact. Might it account, he wondered, for certain flashing inconsistencies of temperament which had helped to make him an alien among the single-natured Sienese? But Stefano was saying, with a sigh:

"I would I had had your opportunities of travel. I longed to leave home, but my father would not allow it."

"Oh, I have been no great wanderer," returned Neri lightly. "I have never crossed the Alps."

"Have you enjoyed your studies?" Stefano asked.

The young scholar shrugged his shoulder. "Mere

husks," he answered—"subdivided, it is true, with extreme fineness, were presented to my spirit's thirst."

Turning to Madonna Giovanna, with an effort to appear unconcerned, he added :

"I would know more, if I may, of this Sister Catherine."

"Her father," said Madonna Giovanna, "was one Jacopo, the tanner. They live close to Fontebranda. When the plague broke out, I believe she was at Florence, but she hastened back ; and I hear she has not paused in her unwearied service to the sick. Well may you say that hers is the countenance of an angel: it resembles no other. I have heard that the mere touch of her hand has caused the afflicted part to heal, and the patient to fall into refreshing sleep."

Neri remembered the hand—large, plebeian, with long, firm, sensitive fingers.

"One hears many things," Stefano was saying lightly. "I am inclined to think that this Benincasa must be a woman of true lovingkindness. Yet it is not easy to know ; much evil is also said about her."

"What nature of evil ?" asked Neri.

"She is one of the Mantellate," Stefano replied. "As these devout ladies are not cloistered, and take no vows, it is fitting that they be women of mature years and of seemly bearing. As you know, they are usually widows. This Catherine Benincasa was a mere girl when her importunities persuaded them to accept her as one of their number. She is still a young woman."

"The fault is transitory," Neri reflected.

Stefano smiled at him.

"Ah ! but the trouble is," said he, "that she is, I suppose, a very eccentric person. They say that she is curiously free in her manners with both men and women. On the other hand, there are rumours of a life of profound retirement, of fasts carried to an extreme, of ecstatic experiences. One knows not what to think. But it is certain that her behaviour at the Sacred Offices has given scandal. She has been ejected from the Church. I have even heard that the Sisters of Penance——"

But here Madonna Giovanna broke in with a maternal rebuke :

"You repeat hearsay too readily, my son. All this is gossip. The services of the Benincasa to the afflicted are a fact."

"She is not alone," returned Stefano. "Though it is true that many priests and physicians have basely fled the city, members of the confraternities are working night and day. The Rector of the Hospital of La Scala is, they say, wholly exhausted. More than one priest may be said to have conducted his own funeral, having fallen stricken above the open grave where he was performing the last rites. Our Lady be thanked, in spite of our absentee French Bishop, works of mercy are not yet at an end in her city."

These remarks threw Neri into a brown study, but he made no comment.

"Do you know more of this Catherine Benincasa?" he asked.

"She has converted Ghinoccia and Francesca Tolomei," said the lady. "They have both become Religious, much to the wrath of their brother, Messer Jacopo, that marvellous and terrible man."

"It is not very difficult to convert young women," remarked Stefano sagely.

His mother looked at him with reproving eyes, and continued, addressing herself markedly to Neri :

"Messere, I will tell you more—an occurrence in our own family. There was a relative of ours, Andrea Bellanti, who scoffed at holiness. To crown the horrors of his life, having lost a large sum at play, he dragged from the wall an image of the Crucified, trampled it under foot, and stabbed it many times." Madonna Giovanna had hidden her face as she spoke ; the children listened, round-eyed ; the young men crossed themselves.

"Now it happened," continued the lady, "that Andrea fell sick unto death. Nor would he cease from raving and cursing, taking all mention of religion in very evil part, till of a sudden, at dawn, his countenance changed. He cried for a priest, confessed his sins made a righteous will, and passed

out of this world with every token of God's mercy. But the strange thing is"—Madonna Giovanna was now talking to her son, and with deep earnestness—"I have it from one of the household who had it from those in the chamber—that in the moment of the change he cried out that Catherine, the Sister of Penance, was visibly before him, and that he could not resist her will. And a good woman of my own household told me that her sister, who is married to a tanner in the Ward of the Goose, said that it was common talk in the neighbourhood how Catherine had received as a special grace from Our Lady the soul of that dying man."

"How about hearsay, mine mother?" asked Stefano, evidently trying to shake off the impression of the story. "Dying men and simple folk are prone to delusion."

The remark was quite in Neri's vein, yet he found his sympathy with the mother.

"Have you ever talked with Catherine?" he asked Stefano.

The other shook his head.

"How should I have seen her?" he replied haughtily. "Tradespeople may rule in Siena nowadays; we nobles, at least, do not mingle with them."

"To speak of social connections and of Catherine Benincasa together is absurd!" exclaimed Madonna Giovanna. "I wish you would seek her out, my son. I wish you would lay before her our unhappy state—the feuds that waste our days and threaten our life. In her presence peace abides. I believe she could make an end to these miseries and reconcile our family to its foes."

Stefano stared at his weeping mother in sheer amazement. At last he found his tongue.

"Do I hear aright?" said he. "You would have me refer the affairs of our family to this young woman—an unlettered plebeian, unknown to us all?"

"Assuredly, so I would have you do," said his mother quietly, though weeping still.

Stefano turned to Neri with a look of wonder.

"From all my heart," said his guest, "I agree with Madonna Giovanna."

The young Maconi smiled in blank helplessness.

"After all, my mother is a woman. One can therefore never be sure what her idea will be," he reflected. "But you, who see life as a young man of honour—you agree with her, Messer Neri?"

But Neri, embarrassed at the sudden decision of his own tone, turned the subject with the gentle but absolute reserve habitual to him, and the matter dropped.

"And what are you all doing at Belcaro?" asked Stefano a little longingly when supper was ended. "I am content enough here, with the prospect of a fight to-morrow; but it must be pleasant there among the roses."

"They wander through the demesne at will," replied Neri absently, "preferring those portions which command no view of Siena. They dance and sing and devise masques. There is much merriment among them and little joy."

As he was speaking Madonna Giovanna watched him with a motherly expression, but Stefano caught at his words.

"Masques?" said he. "As, for example—— I beg you, if you are not too weary, to while away an hour for us in describing these pastimes."

Seeking to gratify his host's request, Neri launched into a description of the revels of the night before. But the cadence of his phrases struck dull upon his ear, nor would his epithets glow. To recall the images and emotions of the Triumph of Amor was to seek in the dimmest chambers of memory for an experience paled by long disuse. Stefano, however, was no critical listener. He had not read the poem of Petrarch—indeed, Neri suspected that the poet's name was not over-familiar to him—but his eager comments revealed a nature quickly receptive, though rather on the human than on the æsthetic side. Ordinarily, Neri, who had a way of enjoying experience best in retrospect, would have taken pleasure in recounting the beautiful pageant to such an auditor. To-night, annoyed at his failure as artist in words, he withdrew early, and once in his bed, fell almost immediately into a sleep profound and free from dreams. He woke at dawn with a strong feeling that Catherine Benincasa was gazing at him, turned on his side, soothed in content, and slept again happily but late.

CHAPTER V

A DECISION

NERI would have liked well to ride with Stefano to the fray the next morning. Though not bred to arms, he could handle a sword on occasion as well as any young gentleman in Tuscany. But a counter-impulse proved the stronger, and he stood watching the young man ride gaily off with his retainers through the dark arch of the portal and down the brick-tiled street.

"Are you leaving Siena to-day?" Stefano had asked as he mounted his horse.

"I should be sorry to leave without learning the outcome of your morning," he had answered. It was the truth, yet not all the truth: conscience troubled him as he spoke.

"So long as you will stay, my house is yours," had been the retort of his host. "I should have great joy in your further company." Madonna Giovanna, bidding her son farewell anxiously but calmly, had found a like word of gracious invitation for the stranger in her gates.

He returned to her now, and from an upper window her eyes and his followed the little troop as it rode on through the shade—a goodly sight, and rich in colour.

"I cannot bear him from my sight!" broke forth the lady; "yet, were he riding forth to defend Siena against Florence, I could bid him God-speed with the proudest! Good days were they for our city, when a mother could see her first-born ride forth to battle and laugh with pride, glad that he should give his life for his town. Ill days these, for women, and for Siena, when her citizens fight each the other, and one's heart's beloved may perish in a senseless

brawl! Messer Neri, will you not remain with me and ease my waiting?"

But Neri roused himself with a start, and took his leave. Were it much better, after all, he had wondered while Madonna Giovanna was speaking, for Tuscan to fight against Tuscan than one citizen of Siena against the other? Devastated Italy rose before his eyes—nay, the whole world opened to the inner vision one great battlefield, whereon the fighting was aimless, hideous, and without end.

He followed in the direction taken by the horsemen. A few steps took him to the Campo. New emotion, never before consciously felt, was stirring in him—the love of place. He felt keenly still all that had repelled him from his youth—the reckless spirit of faction in Siena, the hot suspicion of all other towns that stirred her heart, her religious fanaticism so cheerfully allied to moral carelessness. But his old pride in his indifference to these things was going. He who had shrunk from the town in the days of her prosperity and pride, now in the hour of her visitation felt his heart cleave to her with a feeling that amazed. He welcomed it, conscious that life would be henceforth the richer.

For some reason, the plague-ridden streets presented no terrors to him this morning. He was possessed by the ache of a great compassion, vague but boundless, which reached out to the manifold woes of Siena and of the world. As he walked on, he was dwelling on Stefano's description of the devoted services rendered by the confraternities — those societies which, as he knew, included many men of rank equal to his own, whose ordinary lives gave no hint of aloofness from secular pursuits. Neri had never contemplated joining such a society; indeed, the fleeting religious impulses which visited him from time to time had caused such pain that he had avoided them, turning all the more eagerly to note the colour and fragrance of the cup of life, on account of an instinct that it was not for him to drain. Now, out of his yesterday of ministration, dawned perception of an attitude in which the sorrow of the world might be viewed without despair. Perhaps not by ignoring pain,

but by embracing it, peace could be found. No distinct purpose formed in his mind as he walked on, only an inclination to question why his steps had been led to Siena, and a growing sense that these were epoch-making days.

Without reflection—he who usually let the deed wait on the thought—he retraced his steps toward the region through which he had passed the day before. Looking down beneath a great arch that spanned the Via Fontebranda, he saw two figures climbing the hill. The bare cliff of the church of San Domenico rose behind them in the morning sun. The man lagged and panted; the woman advanced with swift vigour, her carriage buoyant as if on a level road. Life quickened in him as she drew near.

In a moment Catherine Benincasa was greeting him, and her smile held so subtle a suggestion of gladness within gladness that Dante's phrase, "un riso del' universo," flashed on Neri's mind.

"Peace and all hail! I was coming to meet you," she said.

"How knew you where to find me?" Neri asked, his face reflecting the brightness of her own, as still waters catch a luminous sky.

The mystery underlying her tender look deepened.

"A servant of God was praying for you at dawn," she answered. "It was revealed to her that you would pass this way. You are come to tell me that you will remain in the city so long as the plague lasts to aid the sufferers."

As she spoke cross-lights vanished, and one pathway hone clear. Yet Neri hesitated to reply.

Catherine waited a moment, then said, with a mingling of authority and appeal:

"The will of God is this, and thus demands of you."

He paused no longer.

"I will indeed remain," he said, very low, "if so be that I may work by your side."

"In truth, you shall work by my side spiritually," replied Catherine, light added to light in her eyes, "but in bodily fashion not."

And without giving time for protest, she called the man—

also in the Dominican black and white—who was lingering in the background.

"Father Raimondo," said she, "our Lord, who has already given you to me in these last days, for the blessing and guidance of my soul, sends us now another little sheep to be of our company. Do you, then, be his guide to Messer Matteo at the House of Mercy; and do you"—turning to Neri—"say to that excellent man that you come at the bidding of Christ and of Catherine, to put yourself under his direction for any service he may choose."

Her quick step had carried her half-way down the hill before Neri could agree or dissent.

A little amused, yet refreshed also by his impulse to do as he was told, he turned back with his companion. Since the childish days when authority had been discredited in his eyes, Neri had unobtrusively preserved, in the inward life at least, a gentle independence. No one knew save himself, and he perhaps not fully, how deep a yearning to obey underlay his sensitive distaste for the controls to which men yielded easy allegiance. His was a nature that craved to follow as some crave to lead, but that submitted itself reluctantly, and never at the call of convention. Yet the words of Catherine excited no shadow of resentment in his heart, and this because she gave none of the impression—so grateful to the weak, so obnoxious to the strong—of dominating by exertion of her will, but simply that of transmitting power which she had herself received.

He would gladly have remained silent as they climbed back. He was rejoicing in an influx of mystical feeling, for Catherine's tones, rather than her words, had thrown open to him the gates of a new country—that *vera patria* of the Christian's dream, bathed in the light that never was on sea or land. The most spiritual comradeship, if vocal, had been unwelcome. But Fra Raimondo, though sweating and panting from the ascent, proved to be one of the many to whom comradeship implies a constant gentle flow of conversation. A thoughtful man evidently, gentle, humble; not lacking in shrewdness, withal, and ripe, as befitted a son of Dominic, in theological lore. Neri, resigning himself,

listened with interest to the good priest's information. Raimondo's knowledge of Catherine had, it seemed, preceded his own by a week or two only. The priest, a Capuan, had been sent to the Convent of the Blessed Agnes at Montepulciano, and thence to Siena. Catherine, under circumstances not quite clear, had thought herself divinely guided to choose him as her confessor.

"A remarkable woman! a holy woman!" the priest declared.

He looked at Neri as he spoke a little timidly, as one seeking confirmation.

"Yet I confess to you, messere," he added, as Neri kept silence, "that I am at times perplexed. She does strange things."

"I believe that the saints have often appeared eccentric," remarked Neri coldly. A certain conventionality in the tone of thought of Raimondo had already grated on his mind.

The priest nodded thoughtful agreement, as to a statement audacious, yet convincing.

"I suggested something of the sort, in persuading the priests of San Domenico to give her the Communion every day, in accordance with her ardent desire. Yet it is not natural to live upon the Host. I myself faithfully observe the fasts of Holy Church," said the good father plaintively, "though I have an affection of the stomach which makes it painful to me to do so. But honestly, messere, it is pleasant to the natural man to eat. With Catherine, however, one would think that eating was the most unpleasant of tasks, and abstinence the natural law. And when I remonstrate, she does but laugh at me, so merrily that I am silenced."

"It does not seem to me very important whether one eats or not," Neri returned dreamily.

Father Raimondo looked a little dismayed; plainly, no sympathy was to be expected in this quarter.

"A highly convenient opinion, in view of the scarcity in the city," he remarked, and shook with breathless laughter. "Let us rest a moment in the shade," he added, as they reached the top of the hill and looked down from the circling street that formed the ridge into the wide, shallow half-cup of the Campo. "Understand me, messere," he

continued earnestly: "when I am with Catherine, and see her performing the most fearful duties as if she were at a feast; when I listen to her speech on the mysteries of God, I feel a happiness in my soul such as I have never before experienced. They tell me that since she was a child people have known in her presence this peculiar joy. But I am no longer a young man; and hearing of her marvellous visions, I bethink me that we are living in the time of the leopard Hypocrisy. The truth is"—Fra Raimondo spoke in a burst of confidence, a twinkle in his eye, yet with genuine perplexity—"I am aware of the fiendish ingenuity with which the devil is wont to inspire women with delusions, and chiefly religious women. Nevertheless——"

But at this moment a confused mass of men and weapons flashed into the sunshine across the Campo, below the Mangia Tower.

"The fray!" exclaimed Neri, and ran forward down the narrow way into the sunlight, just in time to see the dainty horse on which Stefano had ridden forth that morning break loose from the *mêlée* riderless, and prance wildly through the place, to the imminent danger of footfarers.

Father Raimondo, loitering behind, swerved with a cry of alarm as the creature dashed by, and precipitated himself backward into a little shop. As he fell flat among rolling oranges, Neri caught sight of his gentle face, piteous with terror. For himself, he had clutched at the bridle of the maddened beast, and was dragged on clinging to it. The thing was over in a minute—the foaming creature checked; the screams of women and children changed suddenly to excited exclamations of praise and relief; and Stefano came running up from the lower street, his face flushed and gay as that of a St. George, the ardour of battle in his quivering upper lip.

"Stefano!" cried Neri impetuously, forgetting formalities. "Thanks be to St. Martin! When I saw thy horse I feared——"

"He was tethered—at the—church—door," panted Stefano

breathless and radiant. "It was—a—splendid fight. The Rinaldini is fleeing."

"Wounded?" asked Neri.

"Eh! My spear pierced his shoulder. He is a stout man, larger than I, but less agile."

Stefano was on the point of a pirouette.

"And you?" said Neri.

'Not a scratch," replied the other.

But Neri, noting a stain of red on the neck, searched and found a flesh wound by no means trifling.

"It will be nothing," said Stefano more gravely. "But had it not been for your warning I had been dead by now. As it was, they outnumbered us three to one."

"Hasten home," said Neri, "to the cares of Madonna Giovanna."

And the young men parted, with a look in which affection was no longer disguised. There were indeed the husband for Ilaria! thought Neri, but allowed the other impressions of the morning to sweep the thought away. And now Father Raimondo cautiously emerged from among the oranges.

"A young cavalier of very lovable aspect," he remarked tremulously. "And you, messere, acted your part right valiantly. For me"—he looked up at his companion with an air of frank regret untinctured by shame—"bodily courage is one of the gifts which the Lord has seen fit to deny to my unworthy soul."

Neri, a trifle out of breath, made no answer to the naïf avowal, and they walked on, in silence at last, till they reached the House of Mercy, which was situated not far from the Church of San Domenico, in a street overhanging the region where Catherine had her home.

CHAPTER VI

A BROTHER OF MERCY

The Rector of the House of Mercy was a man in middle life, of erect bearing, genial, and high-bred. Past storms and present calm could be read in his benign face. He was engaged in consultation with two doctors as they entered. Neri, listening to the anxious talk, realized the great need of helpers in the city, realized also that relief was as thoroughly organized as the scarcity of aid would allow. If the exaltation of the day before was quieter within him, the sober recognition of a call to certain service satisfied his spirit.

Master Matteo, when free, gave him a matter-of-fact though cordial welcome, his face softening at the mention of Catherine, and assigned him at once to certain duties within the hospital. Neri, as he left the room, overheard Fra Raimondo offering a report on the sick to whom he was ministering, and perceived with a pang of remorse that the timid man, a stranger to Siena, remained in the city without question to help in her hour of need.

And now began a life such as in his dreams of the future the fastidious young poet had certainly not pictured for himself. In penitent memory of the baby left unburied by the elder-bush, he asked and obtained, after a few days' general service in the hospital, the privilege of devoting his strength wholly to that most essential social service of the hour, one, moreover, held in highest esteem by the Middle Ages among the seven corporal works of mercy—the burial of the dead.

Hidden in the cloak of an oblate of the Misericordia, he moved from house to house, for the most part in a great

silence, often finding that the breath of the Destroyer had passed over all the inmates. That obsession by the image of physical death which spread over Europe like mania as the Middle Ages drew to a close was already strong in Italy ; and Neri had shared to a special degree the shuddering aversion, mingled with more shuddering fascination, with which the men of his time contemplated the decay of the fair tenement they so delicately cherished. Now, in literal fact almost, he might say to corruption, "Thou art my mother," and to the worm, "Thou art my sister." The experience brought no horror : it enfolded him in an august tranquillity.

As he passed all day through the streets tolling his little bell, as entering house after house he numbered the dead and performed the last grave offices, as in the evening he collected the bodies and drove with the death-cart to the appointed spot beyond the city limits, where with scant rites or none the burial took place, he knew deep rest within. Through the long, strange, secluded days so filled with physical labour, he was aware of the profound respite to the ferment of thought which comes from simplicity of purpose. Two of the most insistent illusions in the universe had for the time being left him free. The sense of self, with all its complications, had vanished, and the bodily death in the atmosphere of which he breathed became more and more illusory to his mental vision. That which was so common, so trivial almost, how could it be a fact of final significance in the pilgrimage of the spirit of man ? As he moved among tombs, it befell him, paradoxically enough, to be visited by an intuition of life, victorious and limitless, such as he had never known before ; death became a mere episode in experience — an episode awful indeed in solemnity and significance, but in no sense an end.

What little time was left free from his duties he spent in church, yielding himself to the full healing and exalting power of that liturgy in which the deepest secrets of experience are revealed, the supreme poem of the Christian centuries, wrought by no one poet-worshipper, but by all the people of Christ. The sorrowful contempt for religion which

had clouded his youth was for the moment lifted from his mind, and his ministries related themselves to worship as a matter of course. False clerics and indolent friars had fled the city, but the little band of helpers who remained, whether in secular or religious habit, avowedly drew the inspiration for their labours from Holy Church alone. Neri had of late years turned with distrust from the strong appeal of the Church to feeling and the sense of beauty ; now his childhood's confidence was restored as he perceived in her a unique moral power for the healing and consolation of men. With ardent reverence, then, and humble devotion, he allowed her life of prayer and praise to search and refresh the depths of his soul. And as he knelt in awe at the requiem mass or the vespers for the dead, knowledge came that by the way of renunciation lay the way of fulfilment, and that obedience alone could lead to the country of the free.

On one occasion, which seemed to gather the significance of these weeks in an hour peculiarly full of meaning, it was his fortune to be present at the reception of a brother into that confraternity of mercy with which he had associated himself in labour. The candidate, a man of his own age, was known to him as one of noble birth, whose life had in the past known as its aim the restless gratification of desire. He noted with interest the examination of the candidate by Master Matteo, and listened reverently to the pledge that followed, pronounced before the altar :

" I give me to God and to Holy Mary and to our lords the sick, that all the days of my life I may serve them. And I promise with the help of God to observe chastity, and to live without private possessions, and to observe obedience to that master whom God shall send me."

And Master Matteo made solemn answer :

" According to the promise thou hast made to God, to Holy Mary, and to our lords the sick, we receive thee and the soul of thy father and thy mother to our masses and matins, vespers, and all hours of prayer ; to our fasts and alms, and all benefits which are and shall be wrought daily in the House of the Hospital for all the world, from the day when the hospital was built until the day of judgment."

Two of the brothers then brought the habit, a long tunic of tan colour, with a leather belt and a black cloak, on the left shoulder of which was the cross in the form of Tau ; and Master Matteo continued :

" The House of the Hospital and we promise thee only bread and water and a mean garment. For our lords the poor, of whom we confess us to be the servants, go naked or ill-clad, and it were a shameful thing for the servant to be proud while the lord is humble."

He took the cloak, pointed out the Tau, and placed it on the candidate, saying :

" By this sign of the Cross which we give thee, may God keep thee now and in time to come, and lead thee to eternal life !"

And all the kneeling brothers cried " Amen," and chanted the *Deus Misereatur*, and other prayers.

" Lord, make Thy servant whole, who trusts in Thee.

" Be unto him, O Lord, a tower of strength in the presence of his enemies.

" God, who didst give the Holy Spirit to Thine Apostles, grant to Thy servant his devout petition, that on him to whom thou hast given faith Thou mayst also bestow the largesse of peace."

The largesse of peace ! Already, as Neri went about his tasks in silence, he seemed to know that wondrous gift. He took no vows, but walked in the sense of joyous submission to forces greater than he knew, which had chosen him for ends unguessed.

Often in church, especially in the bare reaches of San Domenico, he would see Catherine ; nor, in after-years, was the memory ever overclouded of the first time he watched her at Mass, nor of the spiritual experience which the sight inspired. On other occasions their paths but seldom crossed. He came upon her one day in the graveyard, digging with her own hands a tiny grave, and tenderly placing within it three small bodies. They were, she told him, those of two baby nieces and a little nephew, three out of eleven members of her family taken by the scourge.

" These at least I shall not lose," she said, rising, her

task accomplished, and lifting her face to the sky. It was haggard, covered with tears, yet still illumined with that look of unconquerable joy.

On another day consternation spread through the hospital, for Master Matteo, whose unobtrusive strength and steady wisdom had seemed to the little band of workers a refuge as unfailing as natural law, suddenly sickened, and they realized for the first time his relentless disregard of the natural limits of the flesh. As sheep unshepherded they gathered near the door of the room where the strong man lay helpless, prostrate with violent headache, which, as he declared, was splitting his head into four parts. Then Catherine stood among them, radiant and full of life, and, without a moment's pause, she went into the sick-room, crying out in ringing tones :

"Master Matteo, rise ! Rise, Master Matteo ! It is no time now to lie sluggishly in your bed !"

At that instant the horrible pain in the head and the fever left the sick man, and he rose up, merry and sound in body, as he had never been before. But Catherine departed as she had come, casting upon Neri as she passed a look of fellowship which made him glow. Then entered presently Father Raimondo, very joyous, and told them that Catherine, meeting him without, had assured him that his friend should not die at that time. And Master Matteo, having declared to the amazement of all that he could relish a substantial breakfast, the table was laid, and the two good men sat down, and Neri with them, and they ate heartily of raw onions and such other food as the scarcity of provisions in the city allowed.

CHAPTER VII

CATHERINE BENINCASA

The dark flood of the pest ebbed gradually. Already, by the beginning of August, Neri found free hours in his days. But at the thought of return to his old interests he discovered himself reluctant to leave the high solitudes in which he had been moving. The man who had planned the Triumph of Amor seemed to have vanished from the house of his body, and the new man faced self-knowledge, curious but unafraid.

One day his hood fell back, as he lifted his face toward a window at the sound of a summoning voice, and Madonna Giovanna, passing at the time on her way from Mass, recognised him with evident pleasure. Neri knew she saw him, but made no sign. Nor, now that leisure was returning, did he seek his new friends the Maconi. Loving humanity more than ever before since he had learned to serve, he yet shrank from personal relations. Neri's temperament combined craving for fellowship with desire for seclusion. He had rare genius for friendship, yet his friends were always doomed to suffer from the sense that they might not possess him wholly, but must reach, sooner or later, a stillness, behind which, they could not but suspect, the true man lived in privacy inviolate, a stranger to their eager desires.

In these days he was especially glad to stand apart—to watch, with a sense of comradeship the keener because silent, those who were engaged like himself in ministry to the suffering. Many, he knew, were visited with private loss, all felt the public anguish; but their close dealing with tragedy was carried on in an atmosphere of large peaceful-

ness, and their natural and unchecked sorrow never deepened into dismay. The scourge was less terrible to these, who moved among its victims, than to those pleasure-seekers at Belcaro seeking to forget its horrors in the joy of life.

He could not refuse—in spite of a shrinking such as he would have felt if urged to approach the altar unprepared—when Fra Raimondo offered one morning to take him to visit Catherine Benincasa. She was the spiritual mother of most of those dedicated to this high service, and the inspiration of their days.

The house of the dyer rose near the foot of a climbing street, not far from the spot where Neri had first felt his terrors ebb on entering Siena. He had passed it often since, and noted the hides spread out to dry on the high wall, and the activity and bustle in the great shop which occupied the lower story. The fortunes of the house of Benincasa had declined in one of the many revolutions which had devastated Siena, yet the business still throve to outward view, and many an apprentice could be seen in the dusk of the bottega, busy with one of the various processes of tanning leather. The impression was of a home of prosperous industry, cheerful, self-respecting, noisy, and odorous. To Catherine's room, however, there was access through a side street on a higher level. As Neri learned later, the luxury of a private room had not always been hers, Madonna Lapa, her good mother, always puzzled and irritated by her daughter's habits, having sought to restore her to more normal ways by denying her all chance of privacy. Catherine herself described to Neri, not without humour, the straits to which she was put in that crowded household of over twenty-five persons, living over the shop, in her efforts after the recollected life. Out of much practical experience she drew her constantly repeated teaching that the soul must and could acquire power, under whatsoever outer circumstances, to retire into the inner cell. Now those difficult days were over; nor did damsel ever rejoice more in her rose-bower than Catherine in her chill, dark little room, with the one small window high aloft in the wall. It was here that she had spent, some ten years previous, three years of retirement

and prayer, while the bustle of the family life went on around, speaking only to her confessor, and coming out only to go to church.

Neri had heard her singing while they climbed the short stair from the street. As she rose to greet them from the wooden bed on which she was half lying, half sitting, she lifted a lapful of flowers carefully in her mantle. He noted for the first time a look of youth in her countenance—she was at this time twenty-eight years old—but noted also deep lines of sleeplessness and suffering around the eyes.

"See, father!" she said, holding up a cross which she was weaving of cyclamen intermingled with fresh green. "Alessia and Lisa have been for a walk in the country, and have brought me all these. Smell! They are rosy as charity, and fragrant as souls in the garden of Holy Church."

Fra Raimondo took the cross with the look of pleasure with which an Italian always greets flowers.

"Sister Catherine loves everything that grows," he said to Neri.

"Why not?" she asked contentedly, looking at the wreath much as Neri had seen her look at a child. "They are the thoughts of God."

"You should go into the country and gather them yourself," suggested her confessor. His manner to his spiritual daughter united tenderness with reverence, and his gentle personality evidently exerted a soothing power.

"I was not strong enough to-day," she answered, contented still. "It has pleased my Lord to give me to-day the gift of weakness and of much pain." A spasm even as she spoke passed over her features. "But I shall go when I may," she went on, undisturbed. "And you shall come too, father. We will go far out of the city, among the fields. Perhaps we can even reach the forest of Lecceto, and visit the hermits and Father William Flete."

"That excellent servant of God does not like to be disturbed at his prayer," said Fra Raimondo, the lines around his eyes wrinkling with amusement.

"True," she answered, looking a little amused also; "but he must suffer that discipline at times, and profit us poor

people by sharing the great favours which God shows him. We will try to reach the Wood of the Lake. There are nowhere so great trees, and they do exceeding good to my soul. Will you be of our company?" she asked, turning to Neri.

"Indeed, if I may," he answered. "It is strange even to think of the green country after these weeks among the tombs."

"Yet in the place where He was crucified there was a garden," she answered thoughtfully; and at this point Father Thomas Fonte and Monna Cecca entered, and the conversation assumed a general tone.

But before the visit ended she drew Neri aside, and asked him if he could, during the next week, write a few letters at her dictation. She explained, with no shame, but with keen regret, that she had never learned the art of writing. Neri assented in great happiness. To be asked a service from anyone soever was always a pleasure that relieved the melancholy sense of his own uselessness which had habitually harassed him; how much more when the request came from Catherine!

He took his leave with Fra Raimondo, and had reached the street door, when he encountered a stout elderly woman, whom the priest presented as Monna Lapa. Neri gazed with amazement at this parent of the exalted Catherine—a kindly, coarse-tongued burgher woman, such as might be seen any day with her basket in the piazza. She looked at the young gentleman with evident approval; then, turning her back upon him, drew Fra Raimondo aside for a whispered talk. Her tones rose presently.

"But I tell you the creature insulted her—insulted Catherine, my daughter, on the public road! And Catherine, in return, invites her home—the woman was in rags—and gives her a warm garment. And because the garment was sleeveless, what must she do but cut the sleeves off a tunic and give those too, with apologies because the stuff did not match! The worst of it is that the cloak was mine! It is true that she has given away everything of her own except that old black mantle, which she has never done patching! All my people have been decent folk," mourned Monna Lapa.

"It is impossible to me to see why Messer Domeneddio should have sent me such an one as this for the youngest. I am sure that Nanna, her twin, would never have troubled me so!"

"You would perhaps be glad to have her leave you, and go to live in Pisa?" suggested Fra Raimondo; whereupon Monna Lapa threw up her hands and began to weep.

"Leave me for Pisa? The light of my eyes! The joy of the house! What say I? of the house? Of the whole street! When she was a mere baby, did not the neighbours borrow her all day, in turn, because she was so lovesome and so gay? Did not someone call her that strange name, Euphrosyne, which a priest told me meant in some ancient tongue the Queen of Joy? Talking of going away, is she? Eh, we will see if a mother has any claims on her own child in Siena!"

"I did not say she would go." Fra Raimondo was twinkling at Neri, and motioning him to start on. "You know well enough, Monna Lapa, that no woman in the Ward of the Goose has a more obedient and devoted daughter than Catherine."

"For devotion it may be so," the old woman called after him. "Obedience is another matter. She may be obedient to you, father, but as for me——"

* * * * *

A few days later the message came that Catherine would be glad of Messer Raniero's help in her letter-writing. He would find her at the house of Alessia Saraceni, the young widow, clothed with the habit of the Mantellate, dearest of Catherine's women friends, already a friend of Neri's also. It was a family scene which greeted him when he arrived, a little before the appointed hour. Alessia, Monna Lapa, and Catherine were talking very fast as they bent over a sack of flour. Such an object had long been precious in Siena, but news was now come at last that the fresh harvest was gathering, and the scarcity would soon be over. Neri could hear from a distance the pleasant tones of Alessia, the loud gutturals of Monna Lapa, and the unmistakable vibration of Catherine's clear voice.

"I tell you that it is musty, quite spoiled and bad. I am not willing, Catherine, that bad flour should be given away from my house," Alessia was saying earnestly.

"Let me see," said Monna Lapa, pressing nearer, and smelling the sack critically. "Certainly not fresh," was her verdict, "but not so bad as you make out. Quite good enough to give to the poor, and glad they ought to be to get it."

"I will give nothing to the poor which I would not use myself!" exclaimed Alessia. "In their likeness our Lord has been found!"

"And we are not to waste His gifts," laughed Catherine cheerily. "Here, give me the sack"; and stooping, she lifted the heavy bag of meal, tossed it lightly on her head, and ran out of the room. Alessia chased her for a few steps, and returned out of breath. "How quickly she always acts, and how strong she is!" she exclaimed with admiration.

"Not so strong as five years ago, though quite as wilful," grumbled Monna Lapa. "When the girl was fifteen she was big as a grown woman. I have seen her with my eyes pick up the burden of a donkey, and run up three flights of stairs with it, laughing all the while. But if one won't eat anything but bread and salad, and pulls her eyes awake in the middle of the night to say her prayers——"

"She is stronger than I now," replied Alessia soothingly, and turned to greet Neri, who had been watching, much amused, and refreshed also, to see in her who had inspired him with so deep an awe the womanly homeliness which had won her the name of the Beata Populana. As he stayed chatting with the women, taking an odd delight in Monna Lapa, and enjoying Alessia's friendliness and the simple ways which obtained in this intimate group, they caught sight of Catherine moving to and fro in the kitchen. She had rolled up her sleeves and was singing blithely, as she threw the meal into the pan and mixed it with large, vigorous hands.

"How swiftly she is doing that!" said Alessia.

"Catherine was always a good mixer," nodded Monna

Lapa; and indeed, in an incredibly short time the bread was in the oven, and Catherine, flushed and merry, came out to them with a song on her lips.

"You will see, Alessia, you will see!" she exclaimed. "Come, now, I wish you to invite Messer Raniero to stay to dinner and eat of my mixing. Yes," she insisted, as Alessia made a wry face. "He is coming upstairs to write for me now, and it would indeed be inhospitable of you to send him away without nourishment. You and my mother may do the baking. Will you come with me now, messere? I thank you sincerely for acceding to my request for your aid."

With all her frank cordiality there was as yet a touch of distance in her manner toward Neri, different from the tone of caressing intimacy which she showed with her avowed disciples. She never abandoned the formal "you" when addressing him; the young man felt a great desire to hear the "thou" from her lips.

Upstairs, they settled at once to work. Neri had seen Catherine the centre of consolation and healing in a city of anguish. He had himself felt in her that ineffable personal charm, pure as compelling, which would doubtless, were secret things made manifest, be known as a determining force in history. From his contact with her in the churches, no less than from common companions he was aware that she moved in a hidden world of vision and marvel, more real to her than the world of sense. Lights from new facets of her surprising personality were now to flash upon him.

"We will write first," she said quietly, "to Madama the Queen Giovanna, of Naples."

Neri could not withhold a gesture of astonishment.

"She is one over whom my spirit has yearned from my youth up," said Catherine. "They who commit great crimes are often most capable of great holiness. I have written her, and received reply. You are ready?"

"'To you, most beloved and reverend mother and sister in Christ Jesus, Madama the Queen, I, Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, write with desire to see you full of the abundant grace of the Holy Spirit, that as a fruitful land you may bring forth good, sweet fruit, and not

thorns and brambles.' The swift words flowed on, poetic, exalted, appealing: 'Up, then, manfully, sweetest sister! It is no longer time to sleep. Uplift in your soul the Standard of the Holy Cross. Full soon must we uplift it in the world, when the Holy Father shall send us against the Turks. Do you be ready, and let us all in a fair troop go forth to die for Christ!'

"And now," said she, as soon as she had reached an end, with a formula of benediction—"now to Monna Agnese, the wife of Peppino, the tailor, in Florence." Monna Agnese, it appeared, was overdoing the matter of fasting, and needed to be warned that there were other more important elements in the spiritual life. "Drink something beside water every day," wrote Catherine. "Work hard to increase thy holy desires, and let all these other things alone."

The next letter was to the Bishop of Florence, to whom she spoke at length in burning words of the simony and indifference of his clergy, urging him to set about the task of Church reform. The next to Pietro Gambacorta, Lord of Pisa, declining an urgent invitation to visit that city; and, finally, sighing a little, she handed to Neri a missive from an obscure Religious in Florence. It was written in a tone of almost insulting suspicion, criticising in particular her personal habits in regard to the taking of food.

"We must now answer this," said she.

"And I trust," Neri ventured, "that you will rebuke his insolence as it deserves."

She shook her head.

"He does not tell me of so many faults that many more might not be told," said she; "yet it is true that we may learn from such a letter to be ourselves most careful not to wish all the servants of God to walk in one way. Write as I tell you:

"'I thank you for the holy zeal you have toward my soul. I am on my guard, as you tell me to be, being well aware that when the devil lost beatitude he did not lose wisdom. Probably God is helping me to correct the miserable vice of gluttony; but I assure you that I make myself eat always

once a day, and sometimes twice. As to you, I pray you not to be light in judging. Remain in the sweet and holy grace of God. Sweet Jesus, Jesus love.'"

"We will write no more this morning," she said, this letter finished.

Neri rose, relieved. His powers had been severely taxed: Catherine dictated with extreme rapidity. He was conscious that her ardent mind had constantly to check itself, and wait on the sluggish movement of his pen. Her whole person vibrated with life as the impetuous words swept on to an end foreseen from the beginning; to share her labours was, for an ordinary nature, to exhaust the vital force. She, however, appeared hardly weary; and it was evident that her new secretary had given satisfaction, for she asked him, with hesitation, and with a touching humility very different from the tone of authority she had assumed in regard to his care of the sick, whether he could continue to render her similar service.

"My time is yours," said Neri, "if you can make use of one who is cold and ignorant of heart."

He spoke sadly, feeling himself a pallid shade beside her vivid flame.

Catherine looked at him with tenderness.

"I have perceived from the first," said she, "that you are one greatly troubled, of soul disposed to conflicts and various fantasies. Remember that God's truth is this: that He created us to give us life eternal."

"I would fain remember," Neri replied mournfully; "but from my childhood I have suffered from confusion of mind."

"Such confusion makes the soul unendurable to itself," sighed she. "It is worse than all other suffering. Turn to the Cross, messere. There is the light that frees us from darkness—not only the gross external darkness of mortal sin, but the darkness of disordered confusion which overwhelms the soul under colour of humility. And grant me, if you will," she added gently, "the strong help of which I stand much in need, such as you have rendered me to-day."

* * * * *

The two made their way downstairs to find the table served. Alessia's face was puzzled.

"The bread smells good—it smells excellently," she said to Neri; "but I am sure it will be bad within. I apologise to you, Messer Raniero," she added, "for the simplicity of our meal."

"You need not, my sister dear," said Catherine. "Messer Neri knows that it would ill befit the servants of God to eat fat and full when there is need among Christ's poor. I am in a hurry to see my bread," she added, hastening to the table.

And they sat down to the pleasantest meal, Neri thought, that he had ever enjoyed. The hot bread proved delicious, its sweet, good, appetizing smell not belied by its taste.

"She was always a good cook," said Monna Lapa, patting her tall daughter lovingly.

"But a good cook cannot make good bread out of musty flour," pondered Alessia.

"Come, come, Alessia, eat and be thankful," laughed Catherine, flushing; "and after dinner we will give the loaves to the poor."

"Yes; you mixed an immense quantity," replied Alessia. "There are at least two dozen loaves in the kitchen."

And, indeed, when they carried the loaves to the gate, and distributed them in pleasant medieval fashion to those who flocked around, there was certainly a surprising quantity.

"It is a miracle—a miracle!" the whisper began to run among the grateful beggars, and Alessia was not slow in strengthening the rumour, by telling how bad the flour had been—spoiled and musty; and how the beloved Populana had made the loaves with her own hands.

And on these doings entered Fra Raimondo, and listened to the talk with beaming face, a trifle sceptical withal. Neri overheard him presently ask Catherine, who had withdrawn in some shyness into the interior of the court, the meaning of the affair.

"Father," she answered, "I had a great zeal that the thing God had sent us for the relief of man should not be

lost, and, moreover, a great compassion for the poor; so I mixed that meal with much fervour of spirit"—she hesitated a moment, then went on, lifting her face to his as if she would help him to read the secrets of her heart—"and as I mixed Our Lady was beside me, with a great company of angels, and she took hold, and helped me mix with her own holy hands."

"No wonder that the bread was sweet!" said Father Raimondo devoutly.

But Catherine turned to Neri, whom she had just discerned, and said, blushing deeply:

"Is it not a fair thought, messere, how often Our Lady must have made with her own hands the bread eaten by Our Blessed Lord? I always think of this when I mix bread."

And Neri understood that she sought to turn his thoughts from herself to God.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WHITE LADY

As Neri sat absorbed in writing for Catherine one day in her own home, a clamour rose suddenly at the foot of her stair. Monna Lapa was attempting to hold someone back.

"Who are these fine folk who insist on entering a decent house, though told they are unwelcome?" she cried. "We have better manners in the Ward of the Goose!"

Against her gutturals rose a woman's voice, blended with masculine accents pleasant, but imperative.

Neri looked up startled, pushed his waving hair from his forehead, and listened.

"I fear that those below are friends of mine," said he timidly.

Then Catherine, who had given orders that no one be admitted, having much writing on hand, and seeming far from well of late, rose painfully and stepped to the door.

"Mother, let the strangers mount," she called.

Whereupon a group of persons made their way upward, and approached with scant ceremony. Even before they spoke the cheerful light and sound of the outer world seemed to enter with them. Their rich garments threw into sharp relief the cold picture confronted, as they came from an outer apartment into the small, ill-lighted chamber. Against the rough plaster walls, relieved only by a great crucifix, stood Catherine, in her Dominican black and white, her eyes hollow, her face full of shadows. Neri, by her side, was clothed in the black which had been the only possible

wear in that city of mourning. The sorrows he had witnessed were still living in his eyes.

Daintily scornful, holding her golden head high, and ignoring her hostess, Ilaria Caselli stepped to his side.

"Neri," she said, speaking low and musically, "I have come to seek you."

He looked at her in dazed silence, as at a visitant from some forgotten world. She was dressed in a long shimmering robe of silver and golden silk, both painted and embroidered with bright strange forms of animals and flowers, The fabric, an inheritance brought from France and long since forbidden by sumptuary laws, clung tight to the suave curves of the body, and veiled the long arms to the wrist. The neck was open, being so cut as to form what was known in the religious slang of the day as the "window of hell." Not only the grace of the woman, but also the touch of elusive mystery that always marked her, were accented by the rare beauty of her apparel. As she moved, a little breath seemed to stir the delicate folds, till the faintly-discerned violets and lilies and the curious organic forms interwoven in the fabric seemed trembling into life.

But now Ilaria's companion spoke—the Cæsar of the Pageant of Amor.

"Deserter! We had no idea of your whereabouts till your letter to me a few days ago. Madonna Ilaria had been fretting to return to Siena. We came down yesterday, and at her request her brother and I have escorted her on this—what shall I say?—adventure of exploration!"

And Gabriele de' Piccolomini made a bow, half courteous, half ironical, in the direction of Catherine.

"Madonna Ilaria is one whose beauty entitles her to be a law to herself," he added, saluting her with grave respect.

Evidently he sought, aware of the audacity of her proceeding, to give her the full benefit of his protection.

Two Franciscan friars stood silent in the shadow behind the others. Ilaria's waiting-woman lingered in the door.

"Come!" said Ilaria, ignoring Catherine and the words of Messer Gabriele.

Then Neri found his tongue, and with it his most formal manners.

"Ilaria," said he, "Sister Catherine Benincasa waits to bid you welcome to her house. Permit me," he added, turning to Catherine, "to present to you my cousins, Madonna Ilaria Caselli, and her brother, Gualtiero degli Orlandi—in religion, Fra Antonio ; also, the friend whom I have wished you to meet, Messer Gabriele, of the Piccolomini."

Ilaria lowered her eyelids imperceptibly in response to Catherine's gentle greeting. Messer Gabriele bowed once more.

"My friend Messer Raniero wrote urging me to seek you out, Sister Catherine," said he coldly. "And indeed, from all I hear, you seem able to cast a spell over men."

"I have no spell," returned Catherine.

Her eyes had been fixed on Ilaria's fair hair and gay apparel, not morosely, but with a look of grief. Now, as she turned to Messer Gabriele, a pleased surprise was in her face.

"Messer Neri has, indeed, spoken of you as of one who might, if he would, be a right valiant knight of God, messere," she continued, "and I perceive that the time of your willingness is at hand."

A different and far pleasanter expression crept slowly over the other's face as she spoke.

"May I ask your meaning?" said he, with a respect no longer assumed but genuine.

"Do not the arms of the Piccolomini bear five crescents upon a cross?" she asked him.

"Gules, on a fond of blue," he said. "And what of that?"

"Is it not the desire of all good Christians that the prophecy be fulfilled—the Cross bear the Crescent as its jewel?" she said, smiling.

"A crusade!" he exclaimed eagerly. His eyes had kindled. "Think you, sister, there is any chance of so noble warfare?"

"I have good reason for hope," she replied. "Hearken!"

At the first sound of her voice Gualtiero, the younger friar, had started a little. His cowl fell back, disclosing a boyish face, much like his sister's, but fuller, less delicate in the oval. It was a face in which the upper and the lower portions were at war, yet each revealed excess, the sunken eyes speaking of fast, vigil, and ascetic passion, while the Cupid's bow of the lips and the round, weak chin were untouched as yet by discipline or restraint. Those lips were parted now, the eyes intent. As Catherine continued to talk with Messer Gabriele, he drew nearer, listening breathless to her words.

Ilaria, too, was gazing on Catherine, beset, as was evident, by pure bewilderment. Neri saw Catherine through her eyes—the mean apparel, the wasted form, the wan and meagre face. But to his vision it was Ilaria who was famished—starved in soul within her choice body and choice raiment—while from the ascetic figure of the other woman life radiated strong and free.

"You left me, Neri," Ilaria was saying, very soft.

"I did your bidding," Neri replied gently.

"You left me," she repeated—"left me and made no sign."

"I could not write you of my occupation, Ilaria," was the grave answer.

"And what"—her eyes had flashed with swift significance—"was this occupation of which you could not write me?"

He controlled himself, and was silent.

"It was always so," she said unsteadily in a moment—"from the time when we were little playmates. We share our griefs and joys. You do me service, saying you are mine. Sudden you leave me, and I know not where you are. This time I have sought you out; but, though you be by my side, I have not found you."

A great pity, mingled with indefinable emotion, rose in Neri's heart. The temptress vanished; in her stead he saw the beloved little Lariella of Rocca d' Orcia, whom he longed to serve indeed.

"Follow me, dear Ilaria!" he urged. "Enter with me a

world where griefs are full of joy, and new delights, unknown to you, are blooming."

Ilaria surveyed his worn figure from head to foot. Her eyes travelled over the bare, blank walls. A comical expression came into her mobile face, as she sniffed a little, wrinkling her nose, a whiff from the tanning with which the region reeked being very perceptible just then. Finally, her look, still puzzled, rested as if reluctantly on Catherine, and repugnance gathered in her face.

"A world of which she holds the key?" was her answer.

She gathered up her glimmering robes and moved to the door, looking back over her shoulder, merry, perplexed, appealing. But Neri, standing beneath the great crucifix, rested his hand lightly on its base.

"Messer Gabriele!" she called.

Messer Gabriele did not hear her; he was absorbed in conversation with Catherine.

"Our sweet God eternal rejoices in few words and many works," they heard her saying.

Gualtiero also stood as if rooted to the spot. Tears gathered in Ilaria's eyes; then Neri stepped to Catherine's side.

"With your permission," said he, "I will escort my cousin to her home."

A gleam of surprised triumph lit Ilaria's face. Catherine looked at her yearningly.

"Surely," she answered Neri. "Messer Gabriele, it will give me pleasure should you care to resume our conversation upon some later day."

Thus unmistakably dismissed, Gabriele de' Piccolomini took leave, having first craved and obtained permission to bring his little son Giovanni with him on his next visit. And now Gualtiero stepped forward.

"And I?" said he. His voice, a little husky, still kept its boyish vibration. "You give me no sign? You speak to me no word of invitation?"

Catherine made no answer.

"I shall come!" he cried, after an instant. "I shall come and gaze upon your face once more!"

"Gaze rather with the eye of your soul upon the face of Our Lady?" returned Catherine sharply, with troubled eyes. But the friars were following the others out of the room. As the party turned to the door of the ante-chamber Ilaria's yellow hair shone bright among the shadows. Catherine started forward, took the hand of the amazed girl, and drew her back, gently but irresistibly.

"Wait for your cousin without," she said to Neri. "I will not retain her long."

As the men stood in the climbing street beside the door, Messer Gabriele broke forth:

"I went to deride; I stayed to bless. Neri mine, I thank you and bid you farewell. Madonna Ilaria is safe in your protection." And he turned abruptly to ascend.

"Whither away, Gabriele?" called Neri, surprised.

His friend retraced a step, and put his hand on the other's shoulder.

"To confession," he answered; and, turning again, was gone.

"And you, Gualtiero?" asked Neri, half idly. "Has Catherine moved you to go to confession too?"

The boy started as from a daze. "I? To confession?" said he.

"Well, and why not?" And then Ilaria, followed by her attendant, appeared, panting, her cheeks a deep rose-red beneath their cosmetics.

"What did she say to you?" asked Gualtiero hungrily, as the party started up the street.

"The insolent woman told me that in worldliness and self-indulgence I compromised my dignity; and she then entreated me with tears to restore my hair to its natural colour!" Ilaria was half sobbing with rage.

Neri, never aware when the sense of fun would strike him, laughed aloud. "And what did you say?" he queried.

"I told her that a woman who, doubtless to conceal the paucity of her locks, hid them under a hideous veil, could not conceive the pleasure of rendering more lovely one of the fairest gifts of Nature. You need not think her so holy for

the matter of that," added Ilaria, with feminine inconsequence. "She told me that she used to let her sister blanch her own hair when she was younger."

At the brow of the hill Gualtiero paused, hesitating.

"It is the hour when we should return," said he.

"Farewell, then," said Ilaria lightly; "and thank you for having robbed your prayers of the time to escort me." As Gualtiero still lingered, she continued: "A woman is in sad plight who has such religious relatives as I; but perhaps Neri will spare the time from his new interests to see me safe to my home." She glanced at her cousin mockingly.

"Assuredly. I have already claimed that privilege," said he. But Gualtiero, glancing at her bewitching face and her raiment, unsuitable to a modest woman on the street, still made no start to go. The red which had ebbed from Ilaria's cheeks returned, though fainter. Neri knew it was reflected in his own. He felt an impulse to shake Gualtiero, yet thought the scruples of the young friar to be not unnatural.

"Good-bye, brother, Fra Antonio of the monkish mind," said Ilaria sharply; and the lad and his companion, after a moment more, during which Ilaria waited contemptuous and Neri perplexed, left them at last.

"You have heard that Stefano is safe?" Neri asked as soon as they were alone but for the waiting-woman who, at a gesture from Ilaria, kept her distance behind.

"Yes, oh yes," she answered, indifferent and sad.

"Thanks to my folly in sending you to Siena," she added bitterly. "Bernabo, the one man who loves me truly, is wounded sore. I have lowered my pride before the Maconi, and you are ensnared by a pious witch."

"Your pride was safe in my keeping," returned he haughtily, and went on with some effort but more earnestness:

"Say not that Bernabo alone loves you truly; it is not so. Stefano Maconi is worthy of all you can give him, and more. I found him, Ilaria, by no means one with his house in their repulse of our offers. Broken negotiations can be renewed. I have thought much; I have done better than think. Should you wish—and how should you not wish? I ask, having

seen him—I will charge myself with their renewal. I am your servant——"

A cry from Ilaria, prolonged, a little pitiful, cut the words on his lips. "Ah, hush, hush!" she was saying. "Do you not understand?"

They had emerged into the light of the Campo beside Fonte Gaia. A cloud was over the sun. She stopped, leaning against the marble basin. Her lids were closed.

"I no longer desire this marriage," she said very low.

He waited, perplexed. She looked up, and placed her hand on his arm.

"Neri, how very ill you look!" she said solicitously.

"I? No, I am not ill," he answered, surprised and touched. "I have had no hint of the pestilence."

"You, who were never strong!" she sighed. "What risks have you been running? Ah, well, you will not tell me, and you would not care to hear——" She checked herself, and went on more lightly: "Proserpine has been making discoveries. She looked in her heart that night, after you left her in the wood—left her to brave death in her service, a service that was your own despite——" She paused, but he made no sign.

"They were anxious days that followed," she continued. "They taught her many things, and, among others, she found that she wished not to be the bride of Stefano Manconi. . . . Neri!"

The broideries on her strange robe crept into soft-hued life as a sunray touched them, piercing the flitting clouds. Perfume wavered in the air. Neri had always told Ilaria that she was fairest at noonday.

"No Proserpine you!" he cried, joying in her beauty, troubled by her words. "No Lady of Shadows! but golden Ceres in her girlhood, mistress of the fruitful earth!"

A subtle smile played through her features. She raised her eyes to him, her hand still on his arm.

"Promise me," she said abruptly, "to see this woman of the dyer's shop no more."

Instinctively Neri shaded his eyes with his hand as he looked at her. The fountain sang by their side.

Then, under the deep arch that spanned one of the radiating streets opening on the Campo, came the brotherhood of the Misericordia, carrying a bier, and chanting as they went. It was a sight still not uncommon, though the plague was now near its end. All the emotions of the last months arose in Neri's heart as they approached.

> "'Quærens me sedisti lassus,
> Redemisti, crucem passus :
> Tantus labor non sit cassus,'"

chanted the brothers, and Neri, falling on his knees devoutly as the bier went by, sang the great words with them in his heart. Steadied in purpose, he rose and placed his hand upon Ilaria's.

"That I may not promise you," he said.

She broke into a laugh, angered and sad to hear.

"Ilaria," said Neri, "I will deal truthfully with you, as soul to soul."

"Deal with me rather as man to woman!" cried Ilaria.

But he went on unheeding :

"When last we talked you told me that I had not found my true lady. You were right. I have found her now, and finding her, I have found for the first time my true love, for you and for all men. You were never so dear to me as in this hour."

She drew her hand away, and looked around—up into the blue sky, down into the waters, as if seeking something.

"Oh, if I might see her I seek!" she murmured, as one bewildered.

"Catherine?" exclaimed Neri, amazed, rejoiced, "you were with her only now! But come, come swiftly, let us return."

"Catherine!" returned Ilaria with impatient scorn ; "I am not be-Catherined as you are!"

"Whom meant you, then?" asked Neri confused.

"I have my Lady, too," Ilaria answered, her self-control failing, her breast panting a little. "But she's lost ; I only see her now in dreams. Do you remember, when we were

little things, many years ago, a white marble woman was found beneath this very fountain ?"

"I remember," said Neri wondering.

"Her naked limbs were of such beauty as never mortal woman had," Ilaria went on in rapid undertones. "When one touched them, though they were marble, one felt the very life. And Siena went wild, and placed her here over the fountain, to rejoice the city of Madonna, and all as they passed were glad. But then disasters came, and they said Madonna was jealous, and I suppose she was ; I conceive her of that disposition."

"And they took the statue," said Neri dreamily, "and broke her in fragments, and buried her by night in the territory of Florence, to bring ill-luck."

"Did she stay buried, do you think ?" whispered Ilaria.

"Perhaps not, for I suppose she was a fiend,' he answered sadly.

"Fiend or not, I have seen her !" Ilaria flung her arms up to the sky, as in a daze of light : "When we were children, in the long days when you left me, to come home with eyes I could not read and sores on your back, I'd play the Lady of the Fountain came to me."

"I fear that was a sin," said he.

"And why, then, did you leave me ?" she returned, in her sharp whisper. "She came—I am sure she came. Only the other night, at Belcaro, I saw her anew. Ah, if you only saw her ! You'd care for no haggard women in habits if you once saw the White Lady !"

From far away the last strains of the Misericordia reached their ears :

"Pie Jesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem."

Neri gazed at Ilaria's bright figure, in its rose and green and silvery gold.

"My lady, too, is a white lady," said he, very reverent : and as she studied his face despair and defeat grew in her own.

"You pity me," said she slowly. "All is over. Farewell."

"Can there be love without pity?" cried Neri, detaining her. "I trow not. God Himself, when He sought to win the love of men, must stoop to their compassion. My heart is all love for you, Ilaria," he ended mournfully.

"I seek neither your love nor your pity," she flashed back at him. "Let us be going. The love which Bernabo Rinaldini gives me is not founded upon compassion."

CHAPTER IX

FRIENDS NEW AND OLD

The talk with Ilaria revealed Neri to himself. Though searched and held by his late experience, he had deferred from day to day any definite decision concerning his future. Now he discovered that such decision had been made without his knowledge; his nature had chosen while his mind was hesitant still.

He sought the home of Catherine the next day, with the intention of laying his life in her hands. As he descended into the now familiar region, the homely vulgarity of the surroundings diverted and exalted him. It assuaged in a measure his perpetual hunger for reality, by offering an outward sign that he had honestly turned from the brilliance and refinement of his past in quest of something more essential.

At the Casa Benincasa he learned with keen regret that Catherine was seriously ill; nor was he allowed to see her again before she left the city, to seek refreshment and rest at a place dear to her—the Convent of the Blessed Agnes of Montepulciano. On second thoughts he was not sorry to be separated from her for a time, so to test in absence the strength of the impulses she had inspired. They proved, to his joy, in no wise weakened. He wandered alone, yet not alone, and deeply satisfied, through the spiritual landscape of which she had opened the portals; nor was her image by any means constantly before his eyes. He had spoken of her to Ilaria as the lady of his dreams; but in truth no reverence for a poet's ideal, no craving for an earthly love, expressed even remotely his feeling for Catherine. The

bond between them was an earnest of the relation souls might bear to souls, not in Paradise, but on that new earth seen in vision by Saint John.

Even after the return of Catherine to Siena, Neri made for some time no attempt to see her. Desiring seclusion, he withdrew to a mission held at Asciano. There, after three days, he made a general confession; and the following morning, having received the Eucharist, he took the decisive step, and wrote to Catherine, expressing his sense of unworthiness, acknowledging the hold which he felt the world still to have upon him, yet requesting her to accept him, if she were willing, as her spiritual son.

She answered at once, and tenderly, her very first words bringing reassurance, even though she did not yet use the "Thou" which he so desired.

"Dearest and most beloved brother and son in Christ Jesus," wrote she; "I, Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, write to comfort you in His precious Blood. . . . You have asked me to receive you as a son; and I, though I be unworthy and wretched, have already so received you, and do receive you with tender love; and I shall hold myself bound before God for you for every sin of which you may be guilty. But I pray you to fulfil my desire, conform you to Christ crucified, rising wholly above the conventions of this world. Clothe you in Christ crucified, for this is that wedding garment which Christ shall give you, wherein you shall sit at table in the enduring life, with them that feast there."

On the day after this letter was received, Neri returned to Siena, glad as one entering on a long-lost heritage. His life adjusted itself now very simply, his time being chiefly spent in labours, by no means light, as the secretary of Catherine. Her relations, already wide, were extending day by day. To write at her dictation was to receive an education, not only in matters spiritual but in human nature as well. If occasionally the fervour of her metaphors and the prolixity of her exhortations annoyed the fastidious young scholar, he was more often amazed at her intellectual vigour, her adaptability, sympathy, and insight. The work,

to his disappointment, brought him less peace than that absorbing care for the ill and dying which had so liberated him from mental distress. By degrees he became once more subject to his old painful activity of thought. But he stilled it, to a certain extent, by maintaining the attitude of docile obedience and prayer, and found succour in that constant subjection of personal mood to the expression of a common experience, which is the precious discipline of Catholic worship, helping through the ages to train the race in an emotional unity which serves as corrective to the tyranny of chance desires, and forms the basis of all true harmony in social life.

Devotion was stimulated and sustained also by the great Sienese art everywhere offered to his gaze. Throughout the city, in secular as in religious buildings, the painters of his fathers' day had depicted man in commerce with eternity. In the faces of those silent citizens, saints and angels, painted on every hand, deepest passion showed through fullest calm. Dreamers, yet carrying in their dreams the memory of the world's sorrows, they had gained high victory from long meditation on redemption accomplished, and on the spiritual glory that transcends. It was revealed to Neri that this art was a true outcome of the spirit of Siena ; as he walked the streets and frequented the churches, he found himself dowered with a new power of discernment. Why, among the fierce and passion-mastered Sienese, had he never before been aware of these others—men and women of a rapt tranquillity in the gaze that spoke of fellowship with things unseen? His eyes being opened, he saw now on every hand such faces as Duccio and Lorenzetti had painted —faces full of noble compassion and human gentleness, yet very peaceful, from contemplation of the mysteries of God. The gift of such a type, of which Catherine was but the most lovely among many exponents, his poor Siena, faction-wracked, had given to the world ! Should it not be remembered, perhaps, as her one abiding achievement when her storms were stilled, her civic agonies forgotten ?

Those whom he watched with reverence received him as a beloved brother. Neri was now to learn the unique quieting and enlarging power of the friendship which is in Christ ;

for he soon discovered that to live the Catholic life was to enter into new relations with his brethren, and in spite of his old shrinking instinct of seclusion, became gently surrounded by new affections. As the plague subsided, and Siena assumed a normal aspect, the little band of Catherine's disciples, lovingly known as the Famiglia, received new members constantly. They were not remarkable people—only ordinary men and women for whom the veil that separates the seen from the unseen had grown thin and sheer ; but if not remarkable themselves, a remarkable force was playing through them. In their eyes was the Vision beheld by that still fellowship which watched from the altar-piece and frescoed wall. Craving that vision, longing to submit him wholly to the force which shaped their days, Neri became united to them one and all in an exceeding tender bond.

It was his good fortune to bring many old friends and acquaintances, as he had brought Gabriele Piccolomini, to the knowledge of his spiritual mother, and even to establish close relations between her and his old patrons, the Salimbeni. Quite unconsciously he became, only less than Catherine herself, the centre of the little group. It was a group comprising persons widely differing in rank, among whom surface distinctions vanished in the presence of a deeper unity. Of women there were many, daughters of both plebeian and patrician houses, most of them cloaked, like Catherine herself ; many Religious also, some, like Master John of Lecceto, and Fra Raimondo, men of weight and learning, others ignorant and holy, as her first confessor, Father Thomas Fonte. Among laymen, many of the best in Siena rallied to her side : Francesco Malavolti, Andrea Vanni the artist, Nigi di Doccio, Cristoforo di Gano the notary, Sano di Maco. The days soon passed in which, entering the service of Catherine, Neri had thought to renounce the society of his peers.

Naturally, these chosen ones sought to bring others into their fellowship ; theirs was the Open Secret, which they longed for all the world to share. Naturally, too, an increasing number of persons regarded what had now

reached the importance of a religious movement, with indifference or aversion. Stefano Maconi remained laughingly or scornfully aloof, despite his mother's entreaties, seconded by Neri, that he seek Catherine's mediation in the feud that still fretted the town. Messer Jacopo, Head of the Tolomei, and Ser Nanni, owner of Belcaro, were angered by Catherine's name, while Ilaria Caselli, as Neri knew to his sorrow, was throwing herself more and more into the wilder pleasures of which Sienese life knew no lack.

But if Ilaria remained hopelessly remote from the sphere of Catherine's influence, her brother, from the day of his first visit, was one of Catherine's most devoted followers. Had she permitted, the lad would have spent all his time free from religious duties by her side. Catherine, however, showed herself for some reason less gracious than her wont to this youngest of her disciples. It was in vain that Fra Antonio threw himself, with an ardour that threatened health if not sanity, into ascetic practices—in vain that he besought her counsels and hung upon her words; no look nor phrase admitted him to that familiar intimacy which Neri, in common with several others, enjoyed. The young friar, seldom received by her, haunted the footsteps of his cousin, who, pitying, perplexed, and vaguely uneasy, sought to mitigate extravagance in religious practice much as he had sought, during Gualtiero's childhood, to mitigate the violence of secular passions. He was rewarded by the assumption of an attitude of spiritual superiority on the part of the Religious, but was none the less aware that, in time of stress, his word and will would hold their ancient power.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Fra Antonio one day, as he entered Neri's apartment. "Messer Bernabo, of the Rinaldini, has formally proposed for the hand of Ilaria. A fitting marriage," he continued, not noting Neri's start of dismay. "For one thing, it will promote peace between houses at enmity, and so please Sister Catherine; for another thing, it is quite time Ilaria was wed. She needs a master. No woman in Siena is more shockingly heedless than she."

"A fitting marriage!" exclaimed Neri, smitten with vague remorse, and with pain no less sharp that he had every

reason to expect the tidings. "How can you say so? Lust and crime dog the footsteps of the Rinaldini!"

The friar shrugged his boyish shoulders.

"Ilaria," he remarked, "has no vocation such as mine—I wish I could say such as yours, my Neri—for the religious life. If she remains in the world, she must follow the world's way. 'Tis an evil way at best. I am praying that you may leave it, my cousin," he went on, turning pleadingly toward Neri. "You have taken the first step. I perceive in you certain excellent dispositions. Tell me, do you feel no call to enter in the path of penitence?"

Neri had from their childhood struggled, not without toil and tribulation, to keep the impetuous lad beside him morally straight. His sense of humour came to the rescue of his newly-developed Christian charity at this turning of the tables.

"I have no intention of turning monk," he answered quietly. "But how does your house view the proposals of the Rinaldini?"

"They hesitate," said the other; "but the man is urgent; the settlements are superb; and, after all, the Rinaldini are but remotely allied to the Tolomei."

"Listen, Gualtiero," said Neri, rising and putting his hand on the friar's shoulder; "I received yesterday a visit from Stefano Maconi. He spoke in confidence, but I may tell you this. Were Ilaria ready, he would overcome his father's indifference, and make an offer for her hand."

"I see not what would be gained," said Gualtiero indifferently. "The Maconi are as hot-tempered as the Rinaldini. You are probably affected by the fact that they quarrel on the same side as ourselves. For me, I have risen above all such earthly feelings."

"Do you not see the difference between the flame that warms and the lightning that can but destroy?" cried Neri. "Listen again! There are reasons. I cannot——" he began over: "It were not expedient for me to sound Ilaria on this matter. Go you. Tell her that if she speak the word, this other marriage shall be proposed. Mention me not."

Gualtiero was looking at him gloomily.

"In the first place," said he, "I ask me, Why this zeal? You cannot wed Ilaria yourself; this Holy Church forbids, and other reasons. Why be so anxious then, that she should wed one rather than another? There is somewhat that I do not understand." He looked his suspicions. "You are very religious of late, my cousin," he sneered. "If Sister Catherine knew certain things, she might not show you so much favour over others."

"Gualtiero," said Neri, with contemptuous self-restraint, his lip curling, "You will fulfil with Ilaria the command that I have given." His contempt vanished as he spoke; he forced the friar's eyes to meet his own, and held them steadily. "But first," he added, with gentle authority, "I advise you to purify your mind by confession of your unclean and unworthy thoughts."

"I crave your pardon," said Gualtiero piteously. "I know not what evil power puts into my mind ideas that I abjure. But ask me not to meddle in secular affairs," he pleaded. I need, as well you see, to dedicate all my time, without reserve, to the interests of my soul. How, otherwise, shall I be ever worthy to enjoy Sister Catherine's favour?"

"You will never win the favour of our mother by neglecting an opportunity of service," said Neri. "'Weary and very bitter'—so I have heard her say—'grows the soul that puts penance as its chief end.'"

* * * * *

The next evening the friar returned.

"I did your errand," said he; "and I know not why it should have put Ilaria in such a rage. She coloured, choked, and bade me tell you—though I had not spoken your name—that, by her will and choice, Messer Bernabo had been informed that his proposals were accepted."

Neri coloured deeply, and hid his face in his hands. Fra Antonio eyed him with curiosity, and a return of suspicious gloom; then, shaking his head as if to shake off an unpleasant impression, abruptly left the room. But Neri, falling on his knees before an image of the Holy Mother, spent the long night in prayer; and in the morning was as much perplexed as ever concerning the exact nature of his distress.

CHAPTER X

A WALK TO LECCETO

On a clear October morning, Neri, with Catherine and a half-dozen others of the Famiglia, set forth lightly over the low hills which he had descended in June, bound on the long-promised visit to Father William Flete at the Wood of the Lake. The path for a considerable distance was the same as that to Belcaro; the oaks, green when he last had traversed it, were russet now; the grapes were harvested.

The little group of friends was in holiday mood, and Neri, joining in the jests and laughter, thought that he had never felt so gay. The restraint of the summer lent the rapture of new discovery to the sight of far horizons, and ecstasy in space, in light, in fragrance, was keen within.

Neri had not in any formal sense severed himself from the world; his renunciation of the joys of sense had been, not primary as with the Franciscan, but as always with those under Dominican influence, merely incidental on a choice of higher interests. Nevertheless, he had forgotten of late the conscious quest for a beautiful existence; he wondered this morning whether this abandonment of the greed of the senses might possibly be the reason why he felt himself, as never before, heir of the lovely earth.

The country around Siena, if less full of religious associations than the Umbria of his student days, still had that mysterious and haunting suggestion of eternity always conveyed by subtle curves, leading the eye to far blue distances.

It was a landscape that could reveal its full significance only to those trained to commerce with the Unseen ; and to-day it yielded its secrets to the man who had spent long weeks in ministration and in prayer, as it had never done of old to the scholar and the poet.

Neri remembered the sorrows of his solitary walk in June, as in a morning of fresh sunshine one remembers a sullen storm outlived.

Catherine, although recovered from her recent illness, had appeared languid as they started, but the encompassing light and air acted as stimulant. The city height crowned above the olive-terraced cliffs by the Hospital of La Scala and the Duomo was still a protecting presence, when Neri saw the woman bowed by sorrows transformed into the vigorous, joyous girl, whom Monna Lapa never ceased to regret. She raised her head, her eyes lightened, and soon she was walking with steps so long and buoyant that her friends could hardly keep the pace. Lagging Alessia—nicknamed the *grassotta* — called out for mercy, whereupon the taller woman started, with the free grace of a daughter of the people, to run down an enticing slope. Alessia, not to be outdone, trotted behind, and the air rang with their laughter. When the company joined them, the two stood at the foot of the slope, Alessia panting, Catherine, a faint tinge in her cheeks, gazing absorbed at the side of the path.

"What is the Mamma looking at?" queried Ser Cristoforo di Gano, peering from the back of the group.

"At an ant-hill, apparently," answered Fra Raimondo, in mild amaze.

When Catherine lifted her brow at last, glad wonder dwelt on it.

"These little creatures," said she, "live in the mind of God. We live there also!" She stretched her arms out as to embrace the landscape, gazing up into the blue air tremulously soft and near. "All lives within the mind of Him who Is, and apart from Him we are not."

She resumed her walk, still in lightsome mood.

"Cra, cra!" she called mockingly to the crows uttering their raucous cry overhead. "We will not be like you,

foolish birds; our cry shall always be, To-day, to-day!"

* * * * *

Hastening down a narrow short-cut from Siena, Fra Antonio presently appeared. He attached himself, breathless, to Neri, who was at the end of the group.

"I knew naught of the expedition," he complained. "Word came to us by chance. The Superior gave me leave. I am here! Think you I might venture to join Sister Catherine?" he asked timidly.

"Hardly," Neri answered, "if she did not invite you."

"And why did she not invite me?" The friar's face was perturbed. "Why does she not care for the welfare of my soul?"

"It distresses her deeply when any one of us depends upon her personal presence," replied Neri.

"But how can I do otherwise?" sighed Gualtiero. "Did you but know! Listen, Neri!"—he spoke with all the impetuous candour of his boyhood—"Thou knowest how suddenly I took the vows. Now, before I met Catherine, devils were making me their sport. In vain I disciplined this vile body till my brothers marvelled, and showed me reverence; thousands of fiends with red-hot pincers did torment it. The soul they visited with most horrible distaste for the sacred offices. I was ready to curse the day of my vows. But now——"

"But now?" asked Neri. He was not surprised at Gualtiero's revelation, remembering in what passionate momentary reaction the boy had taken the solemn step. But now?"

"Now all is well," was the answer. "In all the offices I hear her voice, and the holy words are once more sweet to mine ear. Let me but be with her, all life is blessed. And she repels me," he mourned, looking at Neri, half pitifully, half jealously. "I see her draw others to her side; me she keeps apart! But I seek her still: I seek her now," and he pressed forward.

Catherine, though greeting him formally, and abandoning for the time something of her freedom of manner, did not send him away. Meanwhile Fra Raimondo, who had been walking beside her, fell back and waited for Neri.

"I understand that this young friar is your cousin," said he. "You did a good work in bringing him to Catherine."

"You feel then no wile of the enemy against him?" asked Neri dimly troubled.

The other shook his head emphatically. "Are you thinking," said he, "of my foolish words at our first meeting? Long since all distrust of Catherine was banished from my soul."

"I meant not that," said Neri; but Father Raimondo went on earnestly, unheeding.

"I have been wishing to tell you something, my brother, for you are one dearly loved of our common mother, and to learn of the graces she works is your joy, as it is mine."

Neri bent himself to listen in sympathy. Fra Raimondo, tedious, shrewd, unheroic, limited for all his learning within intellectual horizons beyond which Neri ever sought to strain his eyes, was not the man whom he would by nature have chosen for a friend. But to grace all things are possible, and as during the summer he had seen the priest grow before his eyes in knowledge of spiritual things, reverence for the religious sincerity of the simple had brought forth in his soul humility and love.

"Doubtless, for my sins," said Fra Raimondo, "God has made it difficult for me to believe in signs and marvels. I was soon convinced that Catherine was honest; but might she not be deceived? I remembered how the devil appeared to Fra Rufino in the very guise of the Crucified! Now, travailing in these thoughts it came to me that if through Catherine's prayers I might receive a true contrition, it would be a sure sign of her friendship with God. For the devil would not care, think you, to be the author of contrition?"

"It was well devised," said Neri.

"Especially for me," sighed the priest, "for contrition is difficult to my mind. Sin is so easy, the grace of God so wide, that sometimes my frailty thinks it were hardly worthy of His infinitude to resent, or even note overmuch, aught that our poor mortality can compass. But to return. It befel one day, while we were at Montepulciano, in August, that she came to visit me, who was held on my bed by a certain infirmity; though, indeed, she was more ill than I. And as she talked to me, with a glad countenance, of the love of God and of our ingratitude, I felt myself pierced by her living

words as by sharp arrows. And I rose sobbing, and seemed to be beside the judgment seat of Christ, and I saw me worthy of endless death for my share in His great pain. And after this I beheld that most fair Judge clothe me—for I was naked—with His own garments; and He led me into His house, and gave me sweetest food to eat, and bestowed on me the free gift of life eternal. Then healing fountains of the water of sorrow poured forth from my hard heart, and it shames me to tell of my tears and sighs. She was silent awhile, letting compunction do its work; then said to me, with a smile: 'Father, this is the grace you asked for.'"

The priest was still, and Neri, listening with bowed head, was still also. A note of a belated lark dropped from the sky above. Presently Fra Raimondo resumed, and in his face a great awe shone. He spoke in a whisper.

"More marvellous than this has shown to me unworthy. But of these matters who shall dare to speak? Many will say they are folly, they are delusion; many thus speak of the Holy Gospels. But I shall bear my testimony to my life's end for the sake of those who, though they deign not to believe Magdalen, are constrained to believe Thomas. Know"—and his voice dropped to a whisper—"that I have seen in the face of Catherine the face of Him who Is. May He attest that I lie not, my son, who makes weak things to confound the mighty. I am indeed a Thomas," Fra Raimondo concluded with trembling accents, "that Thomas who would not believe the devout disciples. And I tempted the Lord, and I saw, like Thomas, and handled; and, like him, I cried: 'Behold the Bride of my Lord and God!'"

Absorbed in thought, he and his companion walked onward. Neri could never speak of spiritual experience with the frank simplicity of his new associates. Nay, he always averted his eyes, with a fear of intrusion, from the emotions of his own soul. Yet the old craving for the vision, so strong in childhood, had never died. Among these new friends who brought his subtle and restless nature so great refreshment, partly by the simple definiteness of their unseen universe, signs and marvels were the order of the day. To hear of them, as now, always left the young

scholar half reverent, half doubtful, but wholly distrustful of the validity of his own religious life. He rebuked himself, indeed, for craving an outward sign, even of so spiritual a character as that just heard; on such Catherine herself, for all her mystical experience, placed, as he knew, slight value. "Lord! Dost Thou doubt my faith, that Thou dost send me visions?" she had been known to cry; and Neri, perhaps alone among her disciples, understood the not ignoble pride prompting the words. His instinctive desire searched in deeper regions, but from these regions it called impassioned on the God unseen. According to the law of their several natures, the revelation came to these others; why did his eyes remain blind? Why, in all fervour of prayer and obedience, did that immediate consciousness of the directing God, vouchsafed to all these simple ones—vouchsafed, as he knew, with awesome fulness to Catherine herself—leave him ever on one side? In the experience of the last months, had there been one moment in which, looking back with sincerity unfeigned, he could say, "I saw, I heard?" Glancing at Gualtiero his trouble deepened. How much that seemed from above might in truth rise from the little known depths of our own nature! Loneliness crept cold among his heart-strings. His friends were phantoms in the sunshine—that very sun the delusive image of a sun of righteousness longed for in vain. "Doubtless, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself!" Neri cried out in his mind, not realizing that of him as of another soul, it might perhaps be said: "It is thy very energy of thought which keeps thee from thy God."

His morning gladness faded, Neri walked on in a maze. The way to Lecceto had some time since separated from that to Belcaro. The landscape was blurred into a monotony of paling blue beneath the hot sky, when at last the pilgrims entered the forest. As the live oaks greeted them with grateful shadow, Catherine paused and, encircling with her arms a noble tree, waited till all were about her; then, kissing its bark devoutly, she said:

"Let us give thanks for all the trees of the wood in memory of that Tree most sweet, on which was wrought our salvation."

Whereupon each member of that company, having first made the holy sign, did, when he passed the oak, touch his lips to the bark, as she had done.

Neri lingered a moment, pressing his cheek against the rugged bole. His grieved spirit found consolation in nearness to the ancient, silent creature. As he passed on the unfailing peace of the woods received him, that deep tranquillity of verdurous gloom which absolves the wanderer from the faint glare and soil of the noon. It hushed and called. He saw himself once more a tiny boy in his cave on the hill-slope below Rocca D'Orcia, and the years between shrank into a brief bewilderment before his mind. Dreaming dreams long forgotten, he lagged after his companions.

The Wood of the Lake surrounded with gentle undulations the monastery that nestled among its shadowy foliage. Hermits, so the legend ran, had sought its depths even from the fourth century, finding there, as Francis at La Verna, a spot most meet for devotion. And still a hermit population lived scattered in the wood, not as cenobites sharing a common life, but as true monks spending their days, if not their nights, in isolated cells. With the outer world, they had such relations as temperament or the fame of sanctity determined. At times, indeed, their seclusion threatened to become a social centre. Not many years before, a long-suffering Prior had betaken him to the burial place of the brothers departed, and, in the name of holy obedience, had charged them no longer to work miracles, because, by reason of the throngs who sought them out, the meditations of the living brethren were sadly disturbed.

Brother William Flete, known familiarly as the Bachellor, would have been in great sympathy with the Prior. He was an Englishman of University education, who passing casually through Italy years before, had like many of his countrymen before and since, been captivated by the secret spell of the land. Abandoning all, he had established himself for life in the forest of Lecceto, where he abode, wrestling mightily against the hosts of darkness, while the fame of his austerities spread far and wide. With this distinguished hermit, as with all the chief "servants of God" leading the

contemplative life in Italy, Catherine was on intimate terms. She threaded her way now with assured step through the moss-grown pathways towards his retreat. A happy stillness had fallen on all the pilgrim company.

On an open slope, where glimpses of wide marshy waters could be seen below through the trees, she paused and beckoned noiselessly. The hermit was kneeling before a rude altar in a cave shaped half by nature, half by art. A wandering sunbeam played with his white hair and untrimmed beard. On his fine features, listening stillness rested. His closed eyelids were wrinkled from the intensity of his concentration, and his lips moved as he prayed.

The pilgrims, who had tiptoed forward, watched him with respect; only the artist Vanni whipped out his tablets and began to sketch. But in Neri the instinct stilled for many years awoke into keen craving. Oh, to be thus withdrawn—fret, fever, confusion, not only exiled but forgotten, among the whispering leaves! Not at the end of one day of prayer, as his childish zeal had hoped, might one expect the open vision. But if one made the absolute surrender?—if one wrapped oneself for years in the purity of a great silence?

The unconscious hermit heaved a sigh, and raised his arms cross-wise upward.

And at this juncture Ser Cristoforo di Gano sneezed. It was a great sneeze, turned indeed into a whoop by a vain effort at repression. Brother William started and leaped to his feet. He was a man of aristocratic English type, more portly in build than the Italians.

"Who are you who disturb my soul in its joys?" he exclaimed with a strong British accent.

Catherine stepped forward hastily and laid her hand on the old man's arm.

"It is I, father," she said; "I, your unworthy daughter, who have come to visit you with these my friends."

The severe face softened.

"Sweetest daughter in Christ, you are welcome," said the hermit. "But why"—and a plaining note crept into the voice—"why bring all these? I shall have to move to St. Leonard's," he added as if to himself.

"Dear father and son," was her answer—and it was sympathetically said—"you know that just because things jar on our habits, we must be predisposed to believe that they are pleasing to God. Here are all these children of mine whom I bring to you that you may love them."

"I will love them faithfully," said brother William, "if you will send them on at once to Lecceto. There, Fra Filippo will tell them anecdotes; they are sure to like that—everyone likes it; and I assure you that these stories of his are very profitable to the conscience. Meantime, do you stay here and talk to me."

"Come, now," said Catherine, laughing, "remember that the gracious love which Christ bequeathed to His disciples is not founded in our own profit or delight. But when these are rested, and you have given them a good discourse, they are to go to the convent to dine, and I will remain here with you to the comfort of my soul."

Thus coaxed, the hermit heaved a sigh—not this time of ecstasy—and disposed himself to speak, while the tired walkers, nothing loth, sat in the fern-bed at his feet. Patience, a subject selected doubtless for his own need, was the text of the discourse, which afforded its hearers ample opportunity to practise the virtue. Neri listened with half an ear, rebuked by Catherine's reverent bearing, and idly wondering why holiness was so often past-master in the art of dulness. The sermon over, Brother William, bent on performing his duty, invited the pilgrims to join him in certain litanies, which, truth to tell, he droned through his nose. These pious if perfunctory rites concluded, Catherine relinquished the flock to the guidance of Fra Raimondo, who led them on to the rugged monastery which rose like a grey pile of native rock among the trees.

As they approached, Gualtiero caught Neri's arm, and his cousin's eyes followed his own to the frescoes that ran around the loggia. Here, in colours still bright, were depicted on one side the life of the Religious; on the other, the occupations of the world; and fair were these last and enticing, but shadowed by the wings of tiny, hovering fiends. The frescoes, painted by a pupil of the Lorenzetti,

pleased the artist taste of Neri, who stood looking at them with interest till roused by the whisper of Gualtiero by his side.

"See what I have fled!" cried the Friar under his breath. "See what I have chosen! Oh, my dear cousin, do you enter the way of perfection as I have entered it!"

"Is it done by changing one's apparel, think you?" asked Neri lightly, and drew Gualtiero into the monastery where dinner was waiting, and a pleasant welcome, in spite of the disappointment of the brothers in learning that on this occasion Catherine did not propose to pass the night at the convent as was her wont.

But Neri, as soon as courtesy permitted, slipped away, and wandered into the loneliness of the forest. He sought an hour of prayer, but prayerless meditation seized on him, and he sat gravely clasping his knee at the foot of an oak heavy with lichen, and looked into his mind. Opposing thoughts were flying toward contrary limits of its horizon.

On the one hand, that old longing for the hermit's cell which had risen so strangely from forgotten depths. Was this, perhaps, the end to which life had been leading? Was he to pass, and for ever, from the hot glare of the open road into these cool and solemn shades? Well, and why not? Conviction that the knowledge of God was the goal of all the turmoil of existence was the natural result of these months in which he had been under the influence of the Dominican philosophy represented by Catherine and her associates; and this philosophy had but confirmed the dominant instinct of his nature. He had been watching of late in Vanni's studio the growth of a great altar-piece—a revelation in line and colour of the abstract spirit of worship. Patriarchs, angels, saints, bearing no relation to one another, stood solemnly isolated in golden space, their direct gaze turned, not upon the mystical Madonna in the midst of them, but outward, inward, to the eternal and unconfined. These knew the secret! and he—could he ever attain it in the world? He doubted, almost despaired. The myriad dazzling phenomena of existence were too distracting, too hateful, and too dear. Should it be so always? Must he

remain to the end "a heap of crumbled dust," unable to dwell in the presence of the Eternal, yet miserably homesick as he moved among the things of sense? There was a way of escape! The recluse life, embraced honestly and once for all, was the approved method of reaching those higher levels of sanctity for which his spirit yearned. Were not forty-three hermits supported, as a matter of course, by the government of Siena?

The approved method! Ah, there was the rub! And stronger than the impulse came reaction, for distrust was as innate with him as longing. Toward all accredited forms of the religious life, even toward those which he had himself accepted, Neri felt instinctive fear. Humility ever urged adoption. Was it pride or sincerity which drew him away? Oh, it would be pleasant enough to be a hermit! So far as that went, he knew himself quite capable, especially since the betrothal of Ilaria, of entering a cell from sheer sensitive distaste of the world. But in the forest, as elsewhere, he would bear his shadow with him, none the less surely because its presence might be hidden by the general negation of that sunlight which so inexorably illumined each detail of the open road. The Shadow! the Shadow! All he could ever know or see of self, and yet mere denial of other knowledge. Invading terror seized him. Was he in truth a living soul created for the Vision of God: or perhaps an echo merely, shouted by some fiend in derision, destined to wander for ever disconsolate among waste places, seeking and finding not? And again he cried for the Open Vision, and again he cried in vain.

He rose, and roamed restlessly through the wood in depression, accusing himself of mortal sin. A great hunger for the Eucharist possessed him, for that Food of wayfarers which can alone sustain the pilgrim soul, imparting to it very life eternal in a mystery independent of perception or emotion.

> "'Jesu quem velatum nunc adspicio,
> Ora fiat illud quod tam sitio,
> Ut te revelata cernens facie,
> Visu sim beatus tuæ gloriæ,'"

he murmured. But he might not receive the sacrament without confession. Half he resolved to seek that purification on the morrow, half hesitated, for of all the rites of the Church this caused him the most confusion of thought, owing, in part, to the difficulty he experienced in formulating his self-accusations, in part to a perpetual fear lest, the confessor having failed to apprehend him aright, the confession should not be valid.

CHAPTER XI

THE HERMIT'S CELL

NERI had taken unaware a circuit through the forest. Now, to his surprise, he heard the musical vowels of Catherine blending with the harsh consonanted Italian of Brother William. He had reached the hermit's cell from behind.

As he advanced he saw Fra Antonio standing almost furtively in deep shadow. The young friar was leaning forward eagerly. He started on seeing Neri, and a conscious look flitted across his face.

"I have been praying a long time," he whispered hastily, "and I can always pray better when Sister Catherine is not far away."

Neri sighed; his self-distrust was often increased by recognising in his cousin's attitude a cruder repetition of his own. At his next step he perceived Catherine sitting at the hermit's feet. Her heavy mantle had been thrown aside, she was all in white, her cheeks a little flushed from the heat. Catching sight of him, she stretched out her hand with a gesture of invitation. He entered obediently, and sitting on a bed of leaves listened to the conversation of the two servants of God. To his surprise it turned, not on the subtleties of the spiritual life, but on the politics of the hour.

"The Salimbeni are quieter," Catherine was saying, "but the Maconi still ride the streets armed against the Tolomei. I wish I might have the opportunity to speak with young Messer Stefano: he is of winning aspect."

"I do not know him," said Brother William. "But I am trying to persuade my old friend, Nanni di Ser Vanni

Savini, to talk to you. Since his Belcaro was raided by the people his temper is worse than ever. He told me the other day that he had four feuds which no power of heaven or hell should make him abandon.

Catherine's eyes were abstracted. "Not only in our own town," she broke out, "but all over Italy the red flower of strife is blooming. Pray, Father, pray with humble, constant and continual prayer for poor Siena; pray for all Italy; pray for the Bride of Christ!"

"The crimes of the Papal legates cry aloud to heaven!" said the hermit placidly. "They feed fat and full, and build them palaces in which to dwell and oppress the people of God."

"All these woes would be healed did the Chief Shepherd but return from France to his fold," moaned Catherine. Her eyes were dilated, and the flush had deepened on her cheeks.

"It is best here in the forest." Brother William moved his head as if to escape an unpleasant impression.

"Oh pray for me, that my holy desires increase!" cried she, without heeding. "I believe that my sins are the cause of these great evils. Pray for the Garden of God, that sweet flowers may replace the weeds which choke it."

"I will do so if you wish." Brother William spoke a little reluctantly. "I will try to remember to do so. But were it not better to turn the spirit away from the things of sense? To that end I chose here my home. They do but distract one from union with the Eternal. In prayer my soul tastes of heavenly glories, she sees the Holy City, the writhings of the damned. Rejoicing in these sights, I forget the things of this fleeting world, which pass like the wind."

"They pass like the wind, but they bear souls with them to eternal loss," she murmured, looking troubled.

"Well, I will pray!" sighed Brother William, and added, his eyes kindling, "I will also perform great penances, and I will urge Brother Antonio to do the like, though he is not much disposed to increase his austerities."

"You see yourself advance by way of penance," said Catherine with energy, and a certain touch of impatience, "and you would like to send all people by the same way. But we shall wrong our perfection if we make ourselves

judges of those who do not walk in the same way that we do. Without love the soul may bring forth the virtues, but they will all be stillborn. Penance is not the chief concern, but the devotion of hungry and limitless desire to the honour of God and the salvation of souls."

The disciples had been silently gathering, for the hour of departure was at hand. Catherine rose, sighing, and resumed with some effort her former lightness of manner.

"Remain in the sweet and holy grace of God, dear father," said she. "I shall be glad if you can send Ser Nanni to see me. Say mass in the monastery when Prior John wishes,"—she added in an undertone: "You may lose your consolation, but you will not lose your grace."

Brother William sighed.

"And listen patiently," she persisted, now with a touch of authority, "when Brother Antonio tells you of his spiritual conflicts."

It was more than a sigh this time, it was a groan.

"I shall also tell him to listen to yours," laughed Catherine; and ended in a clearer tone, her eyes embracing the group of disciples, gathered under a great oak by the grotto: "Oh, may we all be clean and virile, and not blown about by every wind that may befall! May we be united and transformed in that holy tree, Christ crucified! Bless us, my father!"

The pilgrims started homeward through a wood illumined by level golden rays that struck under the high branches, turning the beds of fern to pale green flames and the tree-trunks to unsubstantial light. As they emerged into the open country Catherine roused herself from reverie and called Neri to her side.

"I have not seen you all day," she said lovingly. "How has your spirit fared?"

"Much like the day," Neri made answer; "a little fevered toward noontide, but tranquil now."

"I have known you only in the city," she mused; "yet I seem to see you ever against a background of sky in a place of great silence."

Neri looked at her startled.

"What think you of the hermit-life, my mother?" he asked diffidently: the question had been much in his mind that day.

She did not answer him directly; her eyes were wandering to the right, where Belcaro rested on its hill.

"I ran away once, when I was little," she said. "Thinking to imitate the holy fathers of Egypt, I clambered to a cave just outside the city gate, which I mistook for the desert, because no houses could be seen from it. But after praying there till afternoon sorrow seized me at the thought of my mother, and I sobbed and cried till the rose light of the sunset came and took me home."

Story for story, Neri told his own childish memories. She studied his face the while.

"You sought the forest, driven by the sins of Holy Church!" She paused in her walk and faced him. "This day the longing for the hermit-life has reawakened in your soul," said she.

A spirit of perversity seized on Neri; he shrugged his shoulders:

"What I have seen has not wholly predisposed me to that life," he said. "Watching your friend the Bachellor, I remembered the warning I wrote for you last week: 'Beware of spiritual self-love, that clings to its own way under colour of possessing God more fully. A man may be as one standing at the threshold with a light in his hand, who illumines the path of others but remains himself in gloom.'"

Catherine had turned grave.

"Let us not make ourselves judges of the minds of our fellow-creatures," said she, "for of this thing is God alone the judge. The more we live in the light the less we shall criticise our neighbours."

Neri assented, rebuked yet smarting under a slight sense of injustice. Perhaps Catherine perceived this, for she added with impetuous humility:

"This I said, not to thee alone, but to thee and me, my son. I sorrow that I have never followed that true doctrine, but fall again and again, yes, have fallen this very day, into impatience, and a critical attitude toward my neighbour."

And Neri recognised a degree of truth in what she said, for he had seen beneath her all but perfect discipline the exacting critical temper natural to a brilliant woman, of standards higher than those of the people among whom she moved.

"If I spoke unkindly I was thinking less of Brother William than of myself," he said, impelled to full confidence; "for you have seen aright. I long for the recluse life, my mother. Yet I am ever afraid that in me, though not in others, weakness and not strength cries out for the cell. I fear the snare of spiritual self-will. I fear masked human passions. I fear to mistake the consolations of an outward peace, for the visitation of the Spirit of God! Already men are to me but as trees walking. Did I withdraw into the calm I crave I should forget the souls for whom Christ died."

"Couldest thou forget?" she said, as in amaze, and he looked his compunction and his answer.

"It happened to me in August"—she was looking dreamily out to the amethyst distance as she spoke—"that the spirit almost found release. And one night I saw our Lady in the light of Paradise, and I longed to be set free with longing beyond words. But she said: 'Daughter, it is granted you to enter now, if so you choose, into your eternal joy. Nevertheless, if you choose to return, behold the souls whom My Son has given you!' Then behind her I beheld a great company, and some I knew already, and some not yet. And so great a love for them seized upon me that it constrained me as a strong wind, forcing me back; and I cried out, I return! and wakened to great pain."

Neri's eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Was my soul among those seen and loved by you?" he asked involuntarily.

Catherine turned a grieved face upon him.

"Always yourself, my son," was her answer.

He walked onward, shamed, beneath the disappointment in her tone.

"Could I but love them!" he broke forth presently. "Could I but love the souls of men as you love them! Men rasp and hurt me. They fill me with distaste—at

best, with pity. I can serve them, yes ; but love them, no ! Nor can I perceive, save now and then, how much they are beloved of God."

"The hermit life, in truth, is not for thee, as yet," she said, after a moment's meditation, as one reaching a conclusion in her own mind. "Yet beware that thou despise it not ! For when love has been brought to the birth, holy desire can abide and grow in the cell with such purity as the world knows not ; all snare of loving for our own delight, or for vain-glory, being removed. The true hermit can many a time work more for his fellows than were he in the world. The life is high !"

"Had it been the highest," said Neri thoughtfully, "would it not have been chosen by our Lord ?"

Catherine looked up into the sky, her face full of feeling.

"Thanks be to Thee, Eternal Father, that in Thy house are many mansions," was her answer. "Let us beware," she added, turning to Neri, "of wishing to see all the servants of God walk in one way, but rejoice in their diverse ways, and diverse gifts, getting from all of them the fragrance of roses. It is not given to anyone," she continued, speaking to herself as much as to him, "to follow in all its aspects the life of that sweet Word. For He is the Way, and Truth, and Life ; and we are stumbling pilgrims in that way, we see darkly as through a glass, and we move through this dying world as those that are not. Therefore, shall one follow Him by one road, one by another. Which is higher, who shall say ? But, if I am not wrong, none shall avail more to succour the sweet Bride of Christ in the evil times that await her, than those who dedicate themselves in solitude, whether in forest cell or convent, to holy, humble and continual prayer. Would I could make such a home of prayer within those walls !" she added suddenly, pausing in her steady walk to gaze at the fortress of Belcaro, which rose before them, massed above its hill of oaks.

"It is thence that I took my way, on the morning when first I met you," Neri told her. "Small chance that it shall ever be transformed from a haunt of pleasure into a home of prayer."

"The will of God is wonderful, and not to be foretold," mused she.

The two walked on for a time in silence, while the softened evening light gave to the city they approached the look of pearl and jasper. But the thoughts of his forest hour pressed heavily on Neri; he longed for the relief of utterance.

"It is not only the hermit life of which I feel distrust," said he, "nor yet that of the monastery. In all religious life the fear of self-deception still haunts me. Confusion of mind did God lay on me from my youth."

"My son," said Catherine, "tell me your pain."

And thus encouraged, he tried to place before her the struggle of the day, and of the years—that quest for reality, for ever renewed, for ever thwarted! Catholic heir of Catholic ages, Neri well knew that only in unity with a common experience, only by communion with the Church Militant, could his spirit realize itself. Yet was he, then, never to escape the fear lest his be only a borrowed emotion? The risk of insincerity in thus yielding himself to collective experience, introduced into the impulse of humility and subjection, into the constant craving for unity with his brethren, a torturing doubt. It would never have occurred to any man of his day to escape the dilemma by the effort—so great a temporary relief, of so little worth as a permanent solution—to find new forms for the universal and abiding need, and draw his faith from the solitary discoveries of his own nature. Yet again and again, in moments of most ardent worship, he had felt the great forms consecrated by the spiritual experience of the past slipping into formulæ. He never questioned that they had triumphantly rendered the most elusive mysteries; they remained the witness of what heights and depths a man might demand from his spirit. But though Neri could never have put his feeling into words, he was restless and baffled in his efforts to conform his life to theirs. The expression of the spiritual life of the past, it seemed at times that they represented an experience too complex for the individual to compass, yet at the same time too narrow for

the soul that would reach to the future, and explore continents as yet unvisited by spiritual desire. The use of them was beset with perils. How terrible the danger of sacrilegious unreality on the one hand; on the other, what futile solitudes awaited the rashly adventurous soul!

These fears lay beneath the reach of words or consciousness, at least, in his generation; yet Neri endeavoured to express his distress in broken and troubled speech to his spiritual mother. She listened with deep and earnest sympathy; and if while he talked he was keenly, cruelly aware of the loneliness in which each soul abides, he was aware also of the warmth of the fires that burned for ever on her altar, and felt his coldness cheered.

"Thou art called to suffer greatly," she said, in much gentleness, as he finally paused. "I can say to thee this only: no pain shall be so much rewarded of God as weariness of mind and mental torments. But I pray that thy confusion may vanish in the fire of the immeasurable love of God; for confusion binds the arms of holy desire, and makes the soul unendurable to itself. Fear not, my son! Already thou hast entered on the purgative way, and placed thy foot upon the cross. Thou shalt yet drink of the Side, and be illumined; yet kiss the Lips, and be united to thy Lord. The time shall come when thou shalt be pacified by the vision of Jerusalem, and these illusions shall not harbour in thee."

And that night, as Neri, before sleeping, made according to Catherine's counsel an act of faith, intense as his powers could compass, he was visited by consolation. He had, indeed, nor seen nor heard; but had he not moved since the days of the Triumph of Amor? Christ was Way as well as Truth! He was shaken by no convincing emotion: the vision, so constant to Catherine, so familiar to many of his comrades, was still denied to his eyes. Yet in the very response of his obedience, imperfect as it was, to the summons that had rung through his bewildered days, he found, though dimly, the witness to the indwelling God. "As Thou wilt—when Thou wilt—how Thou wilt," he murmured, and fell into the blessedness of dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XII

AS WE FORGIVE

RATHER more than a year after the visit to Brother William, Stefano Maconi came one day to Neri's house. Living in the same city, and belonging to the same social circle, the two had naturally met from time to time. For Neri had severed himself in no artificial way from his natural environment; a serious, recollected, but always sympathetic figure, unaware of the rare power of attraction he exercised, he still played his part, as occasion served, among the conventional activities of the city. He had, however, spent several months during the past year with Catherine at Lucca; and even when in Siena his absorbing interests spun a thin veil between himself and the world without. These interests were no secret in the town; but Neri was reticent about them, except when he unobtrusively sought to draw one friend or another within the sphere of Catherine's influence.

Stefano Maconi had taken his failure to prosecute the matter of the marriage with Ilaria Caselli in very good part. The popular young noble, vividly and somewhat thoughtlessly eager in every interest that life offered from political plotting to street-fighting, had not disguised his wish for closer intimacy with the quieter man. But Neri, though sensitive to the sunny charm which Stefano exercised over all who came near, had been withheld from fully opening his heart—perhaps from an instinct that so bright a nature was debarred by temperament from receiving inwardly the religion of the cross. He had, indeed, more than once renewed his attempt to persuade Stefano to yield to his mother's entreaties, and

accept the offices of Catherine in regard to the still raging feud, but had felt slight hope of success. There had during the last months been cordiality, but no increase of intimacy between the two young men.

To-day, therefore, it was with surprise that he saw the other hastening toward him with illumined face.

"My brother! my brother, indeed!" said Stefano impetuously.

Neri looked into the radiant eyes, and feeling kindled in his own.

"You have seen Catherine!" said he.

"I have seen her!" Stefano assented. "After all these months—what say I months?—years, rather, lost through my heedless folly, wisdom conquered at last. My mother's tears and entreaties sent me, aided by your pleading"—he hesitated a moment—"by the memory of a look in your face, and the wish to be of your fellowship. Pietro Bellanti, who had been reconciled to his enemies by her means, took me to her house——" He paused, abstracted, awe adding a new maturity to his countenance.

"She received me," he continued presently, "not with the timidity of a young girl, but like a sister welcoming a brother returned from lands afar. I cannot tell you her words—nor need I. Are you not with her day by day? May that privilege be mine also! You know the life I have led—the life I shall lead no more! I thought I was happy—yes"—he brushed his forehead, then placed his hands in Neri's with a childlike gesture, and continued, speaking slowly: "It was the happiness of one at a lighted feast—though he seek to forget the outer dark, it is always waiting. The day has risen now: it has put out these flares. You who walk in the light, Raniero, let me walk henceforth by your side."

"My brother, indeed!" was Neri's reply; the quick tears were in his voice and eyes.

"I listened"—Stefano was speaking low—"and I said 'the finger of God is here.' I begged her to accept me as a son, and she accepted me. I am for ever hers and yours, for I am God's from this day."

Neri listened, a little dazed. He had seen many instances of Catherine's marvellous power—a power so great that three confessors accompanied her wherever she went to receive those whom she turned toward penitence. But this instantaneous transformation in the young man who had seemed to embody the joy of this world in its most innocent and alluring carelessness filled him with surprise, and in his thanksgiving a little self-pity mingled. He remembered his own hesitating delays. Had his brightest early raptures, of which memory was most dearly cherished, ever been unshadowed as those of this neophyte? A moment, and baser thoughts vanished in pure delight in Stefano's presence. That joy in a new friendship which sets us free as nothing else from the isolation of our mortal state, inundated, revived him. By a common instinct the clasped hands drew nearer, and that sense of unity which is peace held Neri and Stefano speechless, absorbed in grateful amaze.

A little shy, despite their Latin race, they drew apart presently. "And the feud?" asked Neri.

"She will heal it," Stefano answered. "I unfolded to her all the miserable matter, and she told me to leave it with her, and that she would do her best to procure us a good peace."

"She can do much," said the other; "but do not be too confident. The Rinaldini bear rancour to your house, and Bernabo——" he checked himself, and resumed: "There are no fiercer spirits in Italy, and he is fiercest of the tribe."

"But you would not place limits to the power of Catherine?" asked Stefano wonderingly. "Has she not pacified Nanni di Ser Vanni and me? All his four feuds he has put into her hands, and has made over to her his Castle of Belcaro."

* * * * *

A few days later he came eagerly to his friend. Catherine had carried on vigorous negotiations. The Rinaldini and the Tolomei had actually, at her entreaties, consented to an interview with the heads of the House of the Maconi. The appointment was for this morning, in the Square of the Tolomei. Neri must come there with him—now—at once! Already Stefano, with irresistible assumption, was taking possession of his friend.

He was bubbling over with excitement and hope as they walked briskly on.

"The Rinaldini ought to be in a mood for peace-making," he said lightly, "since Messer Bernabo weds Madonna Ilaria this week. There is one enmity ignored!"

"Grudgingly by the heads of both houses," sighed Neri. "Messer Jacopo of the Tolomei has agreed to grace the wedding, but the Salimbeni stay away. Even the Countess Bianchina, the protectress of our childhood, is not allowed to come. The final banquet is to be at the Tolomei Palace." He gave these superficial details hurriedly, seeking to avoid, for the sake of his friend as of himself, any closer treatment of the subject; but a glance at Stefano's face showed him apparently unconcerned.

"I have not been invited to the festivities. They have been going on some days, have they not?" laughed Stefano. "But I have been admitted to a view of the gifts. What pleased me best was yours—the wedding-chest, painted with those Triumphs of Francesco Petrarca, the poet, of which you once told me. The Triumphs of Chastity and of Time were most excellently wrought. Why has the betrothal been so long?"

"Ilaria deferred the marriage three times," answered Neri, relieved to hear nothing but curiosity in his friend's tones, "till Bernabo, in a rage, joined the company of Sir John Hawkwood, the Englishman. For almost a year he has been engaged in the pastime of ravaging his native land with the English free-lances. Good God! how varying are the tastes of Thy children!"

Stefano laughed at the lugubrious tone. "Messer Bernabo's pastimes are more popular than yours," said he. "One bred to the law like yourself can hardly understand a man-at-arms. But what I myself cannot understand"—and he drew himself up haughtily—"is how a Tuscan noble can sell his sword to the highest bidder, and fight at the bidding of one or another set of city burghers. Times are changed since Roland blew his horn."

"In this case," said Neri, with a concentrated bitterness, "the highest bidder happens to be no city burgher, but the

Vicar of the Lord of Peace. Hawkwood's company ravishes Italy at the command of our lord the Pope."

Ecclesiastical politics were at this time out of Stefano's range. "Let us hope that Madonna Ilaria will quiet the ferocity of Bernabo," said he. "She is not religious—not at all—but she is a lover of peace. I had heard that her young brother, Fra Antonio, was one of the family of Catherine, but I have not met him yet."

"My cousin," said Neri, "is not in Siena."

Stefano noticed the clouding of the face :

"But he will return ? I shall meet him ?" he asked.

Neri shook his head.

"Let us rather trust he will remain away," he sighed ; and as Stefano looked his question he continued, with difficulty : "I must tell you what you are sure to hear, since you have entered the family of Catherine. She has been forced to exile Fra Antonio from her presence. Poor boy ! He knew himself not. He thought he reverenced her as his spiritual mother. Alas, it was with fleshly love he loved her, to his agony and her distress. More is better left unsaid. Enough that before our departure for Lucca I took him far from the city, at Catherine's request, to his old monastery in the hills. There I left him under bonds not to return to Siena. My poor cousin ! I shudder to think of his deeds ; yet he fills me with torturing pity."

Stefano listened horrified.

"He ventured to lift his eyes to the face of our Mother Catherine with natural love !" was his incredulous exclamation. "I should as soon think of casting lustful eyes on Madonna !"

"He did not understand himself. He was as one enslaved," said Neri hastily. "Gualtiero should never have become a Religious. His passionate, variable nature could have been guided aright only by a controlling affection ; but such he is incapable of finding, where you and I have found it—in a devotion not of this earth."

And both were silent, their reverent thoughts shrinking from a subject so alien to their own experience.

The little square in front of the Tolomei palace seemed

full of people; yet a second glance revealed that one party alone of the disputants was present. Currado Maconi stepped to and fro, handsome, fretted, impatient, amid his armed retainers and the brothers of his house, watching the portal of the palace, which was repellently closed. At a little distance, Catherine, accompanied by Alessia, Lisa, and Fra Raimondo, stood with composed earnest face, evidently engaged in prayer. Gabriele de' Piccolomini was moving about restlessly; he had been a chief agent in the negotiations, and he was becoming anxious.

"Yonder is a sweet woman, my son," said Messer Currado; "but what absurdity to suppose that she could bring Jacopo de' Tolomei to this appointment! We are here on a fool's errand. Well, perhaps it will not end in jest!"

He fingered eagerly the sword by his side.

Neri had crossed to Catherine's group.

"What a fool's errand is this!" cried Fra Raimondo, glancing up from his beads. "And dangerous, too! A real woman's scheme! Catherine has done great things, but this is beyond her power."

"They will surely come!" Messer Gabriele insisted. "I had their word, though Jacopo smiled curiously as he gave it!"

But they did not come, though the moments passed; only in time a blind was drawn aside in the grim palace, and the little band below became more restive, angrily aware that they were over-watched.

Stefano had grown red, and his lips set themselves in a stern likeness of his father's. He slipped away, and returned armed to the teeth.

"Well done!" cried Currado. "Let us be avenged before sunset! And how? The insult is rare—let the reprisals be rare also!"

Lisa broke into loud sobbing.

"Come home, Catherine, come home!" she cried.

Then Catherine, who had become troubled in countenance, stepped to Currado and laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Of your courtesy, messere," she said in depreciation; "allow me to pray Messer Gabriele to knock at that closed gate and make inquiries."

Currado started to dissent, but Gabriele had knocked before he could be prevented. The portal opened a trifle; within the shadow of the arch lounged men-at-arms; a little page appeared.

The group in the square gathered close, expectant, Catherine and her women quietly assuming a post at the front. Fra Raimondo, as Neri was entertained to notice, had stationed himself behind a portly retainer.

"Is Messer Jacopo within?" asked Gabriele, with scant but sufficient courtesy.

The page snickered visibly.

"Most honoured sir, I regret to say that he is not." The words were delivered with all the affected impudence of which boys are capable. "My master, and the other gentlemen of the house, rode out of town early this morning, to accompany Bernabo Rinaldini and his affianced upon a snowballing party."

He doubled over with laughter, while from within the house came a ripple of masculine mirth. The door was shut.

"This is too much!" cried Stefano, his face aflame, all chivalry insulted in his eyes. "To horse! To horse! A Maconi! We will follow them into the fields!"

"Good talk!" exclaimed his father. "No fear lest they be not armed. They will expect us! In half an hour the tryst, at the Camollia Gate. Make haste, friends all—see that the beasts are fresh!"

"In faith, I am with you!" said Messer Gabriele, and Neri, handling his sword-hilt, felt a pleasing tingle, long foregone, run through his fingers.

"Come, Raniero, I will give you a mount!" called Stefano, starting away, and Neri followed.

Then, over the merry wrathful tumult of the men-at-arms, the clatter of voices and trample of feet, rose Catherine's tones:

"Stefano!"

He started, paled, and moved with docility to her side.

"My son," she said, looking into the flashing eyes, "lift your soul in prayer."

Suddenly everything in the square was very still.

The young man was gazing at her as if alarmed. His breath came quick. His whole body was tense with an impetus abruptly arrested, which sought to assert itself, but was met by a stronger force. Once, twice, he tried to draw his eyes away from her steady, gentle gaze. Then, still very tense, his lips began to move.

"Pater noster qui es in cœlis, santcificetur nomen tuum."

Only those close at hand could hear the murmured words. But quietly and softly, as a field of tall grass quiets when the wind falls, stillness possessed him. His body relaxed, his eyes turned from Catherine's up to the blue heavens. Freedom and meekness rested on the brow, the lips still moved.

Presently he stepped to his father, and stood before him a little abashed, with head bowed.

"Father, I may not ride with you upon this quest," said he.

Messer Currado, very angry still, and now beset with a new perplexity, frowned at his son.

"Dimitte nobis, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris," repeated Stefano very low. "Father, I am trying—to walk —in a new way. Pardon me, pardon me!" He raised his head. "I can not seek revenge against this insult!" he ended, speaking as one amazed and almost, as it would seem, with regret. "Pardon me, father," he said again.

"The fool's errand has befooled my son," said Messer Currado bitterly, throwing out his hands. "Messer Gabriele, Messer Raniero, shall we send him home to his mother, and ride forth as befits knightly hearts?"

But it did not need the silent dissenting gesture of the two gentlemen to show him that the impulse of wrath had died out in that place. He looked for a moment on his son, love and something very like respect struggling with disappointment in his face, then slowly left the square, followed by his retainers.

Catherine and her disciples had disappeared, and Neri,

touching his friend's hand, led him silently down a winding street, till they found themselves in the square of the church of San Francesco. The two friends leaned on the parapet, looking down past the old wall upon the Porta Ovile, and across the wide, white landscape, darkened to azure by great cloud-shadows. At last Neri spoke softly.

"He, to whom this church is dedicate, is pleased with you this day," said he.

"I asked his intercession," replied Stefano simply, "but chiefly that of our Blessed Lady." He was looking tired; the expression of a grieving child was in his eyes. "Catherine failed," he said presently.

"Not wholly," replied Neri with tenderness.

"No, not wholly," Stefano agreed; and in a moment: "What is there in her that so overawes—that makes one feel, behind all earthly fret and strife and even disaster, the calm of an eternal sorrow that is better than joy? I fear her while I love."

"The longer I know her," returned Neri, "the more I feel the mystery in which her being moves. I feel it most of all since her return last year from Pisa."

"What is it, think you?" asked Stefano.

Neri fixed his eyes on the pure horizon, just now shining with startling brilliancy under a clear tract of sky, while the nearer distance was dark as the under-surface of the clouds.

"I may not say; I hardly dare surmise," he answered low; "but they say, and I believe rightly, that since her stay at Pisa she bears in her body, unseen, the marks of the Lord Jesus."

CHAPTER XIII

A GOOD PEACE

THROUGH a wintry landscape, under a sky of spring, Ilaria rode to her wedding. It was a noble city through which she passed, beautified during the last seventy-five years of turmoil, revolution, and class-war by the expression in architecture and art of the same native energy that had known how to make Sienese liberties respected by Emperors and Popes, and had extended commercial relations over all Europe. The bridal procession, with its gay dresses and coloured tapers, gleamed like a rainbow among the curving, climbing streets of splendid palaces, or against the snow-flecked slopes seen in rare glimpses down over-arched descending ways. The air was both keen and gentle; it woke sweet colour in Ilaria's cheeks, and in those of her flower-like bride-maidens. People came from shops and alleys to see the pretty sight—the dark bridegroom superb in white velvet, the delicate, stately bride, the lovely children throwing blossoms, and the young cavaliers beautiful as the girls in face and array.

To Neri, always delighting like a child in pageantry, the general charm of the scene tingled through consciousness almost as powerfully as the dull particular pain with which he played his part. The Salimbeni holding aloof, and Ilaria's father being engaged in aristocratic brigandage on the Maremma, it came to pass that Neri was the nearest male relative of the bride present. He was therefore first of the four mounted attendants allowed the bride by law, and had honoured his conspicuous place by a choice coat of pale

violet satin, his long stockings being of a darker shade. His face also was in festal array, for whatever mood might lie beneath, Neri's sensitive courtesy always made him play a harmonious part in any social event.

Monna Lapa, equally devoted to weddings and to funerals, had climbed from Fontebranda to see the show.

"Who is that young cavalier in violet who bowed to you with the sun in his smile?" asked one of her gossips.

"A friend of my daughter Catherine," was Lapa's proud reply.

"To think of that! and he beautiful as the archangel Raphael!"

"He should be the bridegroom," said another.

"My daughter has many fine friends," remarked Lapa, "but I like him best of all. He is my friend also, as you may have judged from his bow. As for the bride, she too paid us a visit once, but she's a haughty madam. She knows how to dress, though."

"She has splendid hair; see it shine in the sun through her veil."

"My Catherine's hair was finer and heavier than hers any day. Eh, what a shame it is——" But the procession had passed on.

What were these stabbing pangs in Neri's heart below the brightness? Why did he wish, almost insanely, to take the bridegroom's place. Suppose he did—what then? Ilaria might not be wholly angry! Neri, naturally modest, and absorbed by other thoughts, had thrust out of memory the strange words she had spoken at Belcaro and by Fonte Gaia. But to-day each tone, each accent was ringing perversely in his ears: "To Siena—you! I cannot have you go!" . . . . "Proserpina has been making discoveries." . . . . "Hush! do you not understand?" Stranger things had happened in Tuscany than a substitution of bridegrooms at the altar! They were passing through a grim, narrow street. The bride's head was held high. But he saw a little playfellow standing among the hawthorn-trees in the sunset. "This is what I love,—this—and you, Neri," she was saying.

Now they are in the Campo by Fonte Gaia. What is

this bridal procession doing there? Why are not he and Ilaria alone? He has things to say to her—things foolishly left unsaid when last they stood there together. And in verity the procession stopped, breaking in front of the fountain, the bride, so word was passed, having a fancy to drink of the waters.

A silver cup was brought, and Ilaria, having dismounted, put her lips to it; then swiftly tossed the bright drops toward the sky, humming a melody as she did so. Stooping, she filled the cup once more, and looked on the company with a smile.

"Who shall drink after me?" she said.

"I—I—no—I," called many a merry voice, as the guests crowded near.

"Who but the bridegroom?" queried Bernabo with a laugh, brushing away the others with perhaps a little more decision than was needed.

But she turned from him with a little lift to her chin, and advanced deliberately to where Neri stood somewhat apart, holding his horse's bridle. He had made no effort to draw near.

"All men do my bidding to-day," she said, giving the cup into his hand. "Drink, then."

Puzzled, he sipped the clear water; then, surprised by impulse, flashed the drops upward as he had seen her do. She laughed low, and took the cup from him, nodding as if well pleased.

"The white lady is content. Is not this her altar?" said she in a murmur for his ears alone.

Bernabo meantime had been eyeing Neri with dark malice; but Ilaria, returning to his side, gave him a smile so bewitching that his scowl vanished, as, remounting with his help, she signed for the procession to proceed.

The Duomo glowed within, glorious with hangings like the heart of a damask rose. The bridal party gathered beneath the central dome at the steps of the high altar, behind which Duccio's great Majestas revealed, against a golden background, the solemn mystery of motherhood. During the wedding mass Neri, the devout, tried to feel himself one in

spirit with the obedient family clustered beside Madonna and the Babe. It was in vain. Instead of this crimson dusk, this pillared black and white, he saw the clear noonday by Fonte Gaia; nor could he escape from feeling that there the real ceremony had taken place, and that all this gorgeous sound and show was but a mockery.

Ilaria rose and knelt meanwhile with dignity, and with her own unfailing grace. But as she came down from the altar on the arm of Bernabo, she threw at Neri a glance of mischief, such as she had constantly given him in the sweet old days, when in a dull world they two alone had understood each other.

Well, it was over, and the procession making its way in the sunshine past the lofty unfinished arches that spoke the aspiration and the failure of Siena, down the steep curve to San Giovanni, and so through winding streets to the house where the wedding feast was to be served. This was no other than the Palace of the Tolomei, outside of which a week before an angry group had waited in vain. The palace rose as ever, forbidding and severe; but the great portal stood open to-day, and priceless oriental rugs from the Fair of Champagne were spread from the threshold to the corner where the bride should enter the square.

It was a spot memorable in the history of Siena. In the small Church of San Cristoforo opposite, once the Chapel of the Tolomei Palace, Provenzano Salvani, before the battle of Montaperto, had made splendid answer to the insolent demands of the Florentine envoys, and hither Salimbene de' Salimbeni had brought for his city's use the cartful of golden florins in a chariot covered with scarlet and decked with branches of olive. No loyal Sienese heart but stirred to patriotism in the place.

On this corner Jacopo de' Tolomei flagged, stopped, sought to move on, as one annoyed and amazed at himself; but hesitated afresh, and at last stood stock-still with a bewildered expression. Bernabo Rinaldini and one or two others seemed affected in like manner.

"Why are we loitering?" asked Ilaria. And at her words the procession started again, and again paused.

"Would it not be appropriate," asked Messer Jacopo,

awkwardly and reluctantly, "to cross and enter the Church for a few moments?"

A murmur of surprise passed through the group, which grew more marked when Bernabo, with distinct eagerness, responded:

"Yes! Let us enter!"

"And why?" questioned Ilaria. "Is it for me to remind our host and my bridegroom that the marriage feast is waiting?" She glanced from the richly-strewn pathway which had been prepared for her feet to the cold bricks of the pavement. "This was no part of the ceremonies as planned, I think," said she.

"You are wholly right, madonna!" exclaimed the Tolomei. "I can but apologize for the strange impulse that seized me." So saying he sought to lead the way to the palace, but again some power apparently impeded his march, and in his own despite his feet were drawn to cross the place.

"It is but for a moment," he cried as in desperation. "Be gracious, Madonna Ilaria, to this caprice!" Even as he spoke he had crossed the little square, and disappeared behind the door of the church.

"Messer Jacopo may do what he will," said Ilaria with cold courtesy. "We will await him. My husband remains with me."

"I follow Jacopo!" exclaimed the young Rinaldini; and, seeing Ilaria's eyes flash, he turned, having already started, and called back over his shoulder:

"We paused at Fonte Gaia for the whim of the bride. That was before the ceremony. After it has taken place I believe the whim of the bridegroom is law."

Reply was impossible. He had followed the Tolomei within the church. Thither his uncle and several other men of the two houses had already preceded him, some hastily, some in assumed nonchalance, some with shame-faced reluctance. The procession broke up in confusion, the horsemen having all dismounted, and the bewildered guests, with the bridal group, made their uncertain way across the square and waited on the steps of the church, the women

gathered round the bride. It was chilly standing still in the January air.

Neri, having felt no inclination to enter, remained beside his cousin, who strove in vain to hide her mortification.

"There might be worse caprices than that of entering a church," said he, smiling to the group, with an effort to pass the matter off.

"It is a form of caprice to which all men connected with me seem curiously addicted," sighed Ilaria. "I should never have expected it to strike my husband or Messer Jacopo."

"How cold it is standing outside," shivered a flowery bridesmaid, and pushing aside the heavy leathern curtain she made her way within, followed by a companion.

"You, at all events, remain beside me," said Ilaria gently to Neri. It was her most winsome self that looked at him.

The pain in his heart rose, suffocating once more.

"For a moment only, till your bridegroom return," he said with constraint.

"Oh, life is not over because one is married!" retorted she.

"May it be beginning for you afresh and happily!" he answered with fervour.

Her face, alight with tender mischief, sobered suddenly.

"Have not you and I drunk of the same cup?" she asked him.

Neri had no chance to ask what she meant, for the bridesmaid returned, white-faced.

"The Maconi are within!" she gasped; "Messer Currado and Messer Stefano, and all the men of their House! They were kneeling before the altar; they have just risen, and are seen of Ours!"

"A trap! an ambush!" cried the women, in sharp frightened whispers. "Oh, madonna, let us hasten to the palace! It would not be the first wedding in Siena that has ended in bloodshed!"

"It can be no trap," replied Ilaria. "Nothing forced our party to enter."

And while she hesitated amid terrified murmurs the other bridesmaid came out, still paler than the first.

"A miracle!" she cried. "From before the altar rose a woman in white. Light streams from her countenance. She is raised above the earth. Our friends had drawn their swords; they were advancing on the Maconi; they beheld her and fell back as if stunned! Enter, enter!"

Neri seized Ilaria by the hand, and together they penetrated the church.

The men of the House of Maconi, standing near the altar, faced them. Neri was struck with the dignified expression of Messer Currado and his son. The gentlemen of the rival House confronted the others, restive, angered. Bernabo's hand was on his sword, yet at pause.

Catherine stood in silent ecstasy, the light from a high window full upon her face, that shone like a vision indeed in the surrounding dusk. As they moved nearer Stefano stepped forward to the hostile group:

"Gentlemen," said he, "you are, as I believe, brought hither, perhaps against your fleshly will, as we, too, have been brought, by the will of God, working through His handmaid. Before this Presence"—he glanced at the altar, beside which Catherine stood listening, very still—"enmity should cease, insults be forgotten, and rivalries foregone. In the name of our House, I entreat you that the long feud between us may know an end; and in whatever point we on our side may have been in the wrong and given just offence, I crave forgiveness."

"Does Messer Currado second this your apology?" asked Jacopo Tolomei formally:

At the word apology Currado frowned, but Stefano, touching his hand lightly, he said:

"Of apology there is no question here; but I agree with my son. If in any point we have wrought contrary to the will of God, I for my part desire to do so no more."

Now Catherine, leaving her place, went quickly to the heads of the two houses and spoke to them in urgent undertones, her pleading face illumined no longer from without but from within. It was evident that Messer Jacopo was moved; the Rinaldini, especially Bernabo, seemed to hesitate longer.

"Ilaria," said Neri impetuously, "here is the moment! You who are a lover of peace, go to your bridegroom! He will not refuse you. Urge him for your sake to forego his enmity!"

Ilaria hesitated, frowning.

"Shall I play second to yonder Catherine?" said she.

"Surely if you are less than she a peacemaker," he flashed with a little scorn.

"I will not go!" she cried, and choked a little. "This was my day, and she has spoiled it! It will live in your memory as hers, not mine!"

But Neri, hardly heeding, was lending anxious ear to what passed by the altar.

She touched him a little timidly.

"I will not go," said she in a weary voice. "But go you as my messenger. Tell Bernabo that old things are dead, and as I have forgotten them, so he, too, must forget. He can see well enough that Stefano thinks not of me, nor I of him! Say that I crave the boon of peace on this our wedding day."

So Neri, in his pale violet, advanced through the church and delivered his message, with an omission, not in an aside, as Ilaria had perhaps intended, but clearly and solemnly, that all might hear.

Perhaps Bernabo was aware that he had spoken rudely on entering the church; at all events, he made answer with subdued bearing:

"I yield to the request of my bride; no one has a better right than she to command that I make peace with the Maconi."

"But I," said his uncle, the head of his house, "yield to the will and words of this woman sent of God."

"And I," said as one amazed Jacopo de' Tolomei.

Then Catherine turned to Stefano, content upon her face.

"Did I not tell you that though they would not listen to me, they should listen to God, whether they would or no?" she exulted.

She stood once more on the altar steps, and bade the strong men gathered before her to give one to the other the

kiss of peace. Seriously they obeyed; the women, now drawn near, watching the while, awed and joyous. All could see that this was no frozen truce under which anger still surged and bubbled, but a true conciliation. Enmity had died out of these hearts, strangely, suddenly, as is ever and again its way; love had been born instead, and holy joy. And when, two by two, the leaders of the hostile houses had given each other the grave embrace, slowly, solemnly, as if it were a sacramental rite, all present, by common consent, fell on their knees in silent prayer. A wonderful hush, a sense of release and calm, brooded around them, as if the great wings of angels overspread shielded the place from passion and from storm.

Catherine, when the worshippers arose, had left the church. They came out together, arm in arm, into the little square, to find it full of people gathered by the rumour of what was going on. At the sight of Jacopo Tolomei and Currado Maconi discoursing lovingly, the crowd broke into murmurs of incredulous gladness; for the feud had these three years past wasted and tormented the city.

"It is Catherine—Catherine—the blessed one of the people! Blessed be her name indeed!" ran the sobbing murmur.

"She who has healed this obstinate feud in Siena—how do we know that she may not heal the wounds of all Italy, in God's good time?"

"Too large a hope! Nought but the return of our father the Pope to his own could heal those cruel wounds!"

"See! see! the bride. How wondrous fair! Ah! the fine show!" cried a young lad.

And an old man, with quavering voice, answered:

"Ay! 'Tis indeed a pageant of peace, such as Messer Ambrogio painted for our joy and our learning in the great hall of the palace of the city. That which Siena dreamed, Siena hath now wrought."

By invitation of Messer Jacopo, his whilom foes, having first hastened home to put themselves in festal array, were honoured guests at the bridal feast. Neri arranged that he should be placed beside Stefano. Gladness was in their hearts, yet not all gladness though the feud was done. The

smiles of Bernabo, and his loud merriment at the head of the table, could not mask the lines of brutal force in his handsome face. Ilaria sat impassive as exquisite. And each of the young men wondered if the other were yearning for the bridegroom's place.

"Neri," said Stefano with the frank impulsiveness which never gave offence, "she should be yours, not Bernabo's."

"No, not mine," answered Neri moodily.

"Then could I long for her myself," said Stefano, and continued a little regretfully: "But I long thought you loved her, and might marry her. Had I not so supposed, I should have pressed the matter of her marriage to myself, even after your rebuff. From the day that she sent me warning and saved my life, my heart did turn to her. But I restrained me for your sake."

A shadow swept over Neri's face.

"I was right," exclaimed Stefano remorsefully. "You loved her, and I have been speaking lightly! Forgive, forgive!"

Neri smiled dolorously.

"There is naught to forgive," said he, more tempestuously than was his wont. "Would she were yours! 'Tis true I love her; I have loved her long. Yet I think I could be glad this day were you in yonder place. For never, in stormiest hours, have I dreamed she could be mine. Our relationship is within the prohibited degrees. And she loved you once—would have wed you, perchance, had I played my part more nobly. How shall a man be sure what is hidden in his heart? Perhaps I longed, for my own sake, to keep Ilaria unwed."

As Neri spoke with increasing agitation, Stefano's eyes were fixed on him in loving sympathy.

"Do not torment yourself," he said, eager to soothe. "If Madonna Ilaria ever did me the grace to look on me with favour, that time is long past. I have met her often, watched her much during the last year. It is not I whom she loves, Neri, it is yourself. But you, my friend, could not wed her since the union would not have been blessed by Holy Church."

The marchpane, served with rich meats, had been removed; sweetmeats gilded in fantastic forms were being passed. Presently the toasts would be called for; and as the merry feast progressed, Neri's heart retired into silence. Had not his friend's alarming directness revealed to him what he had resolutely refused to perceive?

"Do not trouble," he heard Stefano saying in lighter tones. "Madonna Ilaria has, as every one says, made a most wise and prudent marriage. As for us, we are young. The day will come when I shall sit at your bridal."

Neri involuntarily repressed a shiver.

"Can you not think of it?" asked Stefano with tenderness. "But it will probably happen; or do you feel the religious vocation?

"If I shrink from marriage," Neri replied gloomy, but trying to meet his friend's affection, "it is not because I discover in myself a vocation for the cloister. And yet—at times——" He checked himself abruptly, with a sigh. "And you, Stefano?" he asked.

Stefano shook his handsome head.

"I hope to marry a woman, beautiful, good, young, and like my mother," he said, adding thoughtfully: "But who can say? Perhaps God has other plans. My only great wish now in all the world is to remain by the side of Catherine."

"And mine," agreed Neri, speaking from his heart; but though he tried to fix his mind on more spiritual things, the conviction would not leave him that his relations with his cousin were not ended.

PART II

"Why art thou fallen into such confusion and almost despair? And where is the hope which thou hadst in the kingdom of God?"

"I die and cannot die, my heart breaks and cannot break, from the desire I have of the renewal of Holy Church."

"Dearest son, the City of the Soul has many gates—Memory, Intellect, and Will. At times the intellect sees nothing but shadows, the memory is occupied with vain and transitory things. No one of these gates is in our possession except the Gate of Will. While this gate is not open—that is, while Will does not consent to what Memory and Intellect experience—our city keeps its free privileges for ever."

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA.

CHAPTER I

THE COMMISSION

"See, my sweetest sons, that you who rebel against Holy Church and our Father, Christ on earth, fall under the ban of death; for God has ordained that only through the hands of His Vicar shall the life of Christ be given us in the Eucharist."

Neri, bending over his wide page, wrote diligently in his clear and even characters. Catherine, walking up and down, as was her wont when dictating, spoke in an undertone modulated now to command, now to pleading, now to simple statement of fact. Unaware as always of her scribe, she was not composing a literary document, but pouring forth her mind in fervid speech to the lords of Florence.

"Many think that they do not offend God by attacking the Church and its priests, because they say the priests are bad men. But I tell you that we should obey, not these men, but what they represent. Alas, sons mine, weeping I pray and constrain you on behalf of Christ crucified, that you make peace with Christ on earth! for otherwise——"

The voice stopped, and Neri looked up expectant. Catherine had evidently returned from Florence; her eyes were bent on himself.

"Why art thou sad, my son?" she asked.

"Mother, how do you know I am sad?" returned the secretary.

Catherine replied with the smile that made a man gladly conscious that the secrets of his heart lay bare before her.

"Thy soul called me," said she. "Tell me thy need."

Neri was looking up at her, his thin face a little troubled.

"I did not know that I was more sad than usual," he answered. "You know I am not naturally joyous like Stefano, nor placid like Fra Raimondo. Shall we not finish the letter? You said we were also to write to the Archbishop of Otranto."

"These are in less need than thou," said Catherine gently. "Take courage; enter the cell of self-knowledge. There shalt thou find the knowledge of the sweet goodness of God."

"Within," said Neri, sighing, "I discern nothing clearly. My soul is as a house of which the windows look out on a prospect beset with fog."

"Is it thine old trouble—that God gives thee no sensible consolations? Again I say to thee, that He can give the gift without the grace. This last he withholds perhaps in mercy, lest thou love thy neighbour and Him for thine own sake, and not for theirs."

Neri's expression was lightly ironical.

"For once," said he, "I was not thinking about myself. It is the gloom without that darkens my spirit. What do we these last months, you and I, but gaze on wickedness? You bid me rejoice in the virtues of the servants of God; I weary of writing at your bidding letters of rebuke. You talk of love; hate sits enthroned, strides through the streets, lurks in all privy places. Do hostile cities unite? 'Tis to league themselves, Florence at the head, against the Church of God.

"Lucca has remained firm, and Pisa," said Catherine. "Be comforted, for the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Bride of Christ."

Neri shrugged his shoulders.

"Nevertheless," he said, "I confess that I do not see the Florentines responsive to your urgings coming to lay their heads as humble lambs in the bosom of Pope Gregory."

A gleam of humour flitted over Catherine's face.

"If they must fight," said she, "let us seek to divert their passions against the infidels. Therefore, I urge a crusade. Hast thou never noticed that few men are so wicked as to be unwilling to serve God if they can at the same time indulge

their tastes? I sent Fra Raimondo of late to Sir John Hawkwood, and he found the Englishman in excellent dispositions. Nothing, said Sir John, would please him better than to adventure oversea in the cause of the Holy Sepulchre. Now, if the chief captain of fortune in Italy and the mercenary bands which are the very cause of the continued strife in the land think thus, why not the Florentines? The wars that ravage Christendom are unholy: let us put an end to them by uniting all Christians in a holy war."

"Is war ever holy?" Neri mused.

"It is holy and just to defend the people of God against the infidels," she answered emphatically. "Hast thou forgotten how great at present is the menace of the Turks? Also we may convert those infidels. God grant it!"

"True," said Neri, with a little sneer. "An excellent plan; for I incline to think they would make better Christians than we."

Catherine ignored the sneer; her face brightened.

"Ever thou understandest me!" she cried. "If we might see in Christendom the purity and ardent faith of those to whom the creed is new!"

Neri rose impetuously, and pushed the waving hair back from his forehead.

"My mother, my mother!" he exclaimed in sorrow. "I am not as you think! Where you are hot, I am cold; where you see the holy will of God, I see the wiles of men. Listen! it is when I gaze upon the Church that confusion does most horribly possess me. What do I behold? The Holy City Jerusalem, Vision of Peace? Fraud rather, open sin, and secret shame! I wrote hard words at your bidding to Florence just now; my mind went not easily with them. How, I ask me, shall she do other than rebel against William of Noellet, who let her starve in time of famine? Narni, Perugia, Radicofani, the eighty cities all that form the League, you know, as I, what wrongs they have suffered from the proud and wanton princes sent to them in the name of the Prince of Peace. Throughout all Italy, the shepherds of the people devour their flocks, and the chief shepherd leaves us desolate, while he listens to

pleasant piping in a land afar. As I fled, an angry child, when my confessor cheated the peasants, so I would fain flee to-day, far from sight or sound of the sins of the ministers of God."

He had spoken vehemently, and stood now, with sullen brow, expecting rebuke. But while he talked, the shadow on his face had overspread Catherine's own. Among her disciples, Neri was possibly the only one to share her own breadth of interests and sweep of vision. Both had that instinct to identify themselves with the wider life of the age, that dooms a nature in any period to inevitable pain. But what drove the man for the most part to silent depression, was to the woman a passionate and active sorrow, such as could consume the body, but never quench the spirit. To him it was frost, to her fire. Now, disregarding his last words, she broke forth in an exceeding bitter cry.

"Oh me, my son beloved, thou speakest truth! For ever since Holy Church has aimed at temporal dominion rather than spiritual, things have gone from bad to worse. I die and cannot die, beholding the sins of the ministers of God, for they seem no men, but demons incarnate. Lovers of themselves, indulgent to the crimes of others, they haste to honours and delights. Those who ought to be a mirror of voluntary poverty, meek as lambs, appear in such luxury and state and worldly vanity as if they had turned them to the world a hundred times. And Christ on earth, the chief physician, does but anoint the wounds of the Church with pleasant words, instead of using the knife, to cauterize and heal. Woe is me, for we have fallen into exile, we are at war with God! I see the Christian religion lying as one dead; darkness invades the light, for by holy faith itself men's sight becomes bewildered, and the pupil of their eye sees no longer. Justice, O Lord, upon the multitude of our iniquities! For I believe that through my sins these evils have fallen upon us!"

As Catherine's passion grew, her person was transformed; with her countenance, anguish had its will. Yet to behold her was not painful. Light, as of a quivering flame, seemed to hover around her; her body appeared buoyant, as if

floating above the ground. To Neri, watching, the air in the room seemed to quiver with spiritual presences; a moment, and the veil would be withdrawn! But was she not herself a spiritual presence? No fleshly woman, but a Passion embodied, such as Giotto and Lorenzetti had painted, the grieving Spirit of the Church of God!

With the last words, a slight change passed over her. Tears ceased, the limbs became rigid, listening ecstasy crept into her face. Catherine was in trance.

Her disciple, accustomed to this experience, knelt beside her reverently, and the moments passed.

"Catherine! Catherine!" called a cheerful voice below; but Catherine's ears were sealed to earthly summons.

Presently the door opened, and Alessia, still calling, entered the room. As she caught sight of her friend she paused, motherly protection and pride blending with religious devotion in her pleasant face.

"Eh, is that how it is?" said she, with no pains to modulate her voice. "Well! luckily she is not charged to-day with cooking the dinner. Last time it happened, she was in the kitchen, poor darling, when the Lord took her to Himself, and the meat was burned to a cinder. Stay with her, Neri; see that she does not hurt herself. It is not well for her to be alone when our Lord bids her return to this miserable world."

Neri, still on his knees, nodded, smiling. Alessia bent, lifted the hem of Catherine's habit to her lips, then left the room. Catherine had not stirred; still she listened to things afar.

At last she swayed, the limbs relaxed, and she came back to earth with the aspect of a bewildered child, who wonders where it is. Neri sprang to her support, and helped her to her pallet. She lay with closed eyes, the pathetic look of suffering and love that always dwelt beneath her full lids, intensified yet quieted. She smiled at him presently.

"I will tell thee for thy comfort," she said, speaking low, "the wonderful things that God has shown me. I felt an intense sorrow over the sins of Holy Church; so I lifted the eye of my mind, and I saw that I am nothing, and God

alone is He who Is. And He said to me, 'Fear not, dear daughter, for all are in My hands, either by justice or mercy, therefore all are mine, and they shall be saved by means of My servants. Do thou, then, grow more and more in hunger and desire, and hold thee ready to lay down thy life, if need be, for the mystical body of Holy Church. For desiring her reformation, thou dost desire the salvation of all men, since she is the universal body of all creatures that share the light of holy faith ; and when she is reformed, the gain of the whole world will follow. So I summon thee and my other servants to work for her with desire, and prayer, and all the skill I give them. Up! labour manfully! For through Christ crucified you can do all things!' And when the Lord had thus spoken, the fire of my desire so increased that I longed to shed my blood, my life, and to annihilate my very consciousness for the Bride of Christ. Had it been possible for me to give my life for her a thousand times a day from now till the Day of Judgment, it seemed to me it would be less than a drop of the sea ; and so it would."

She had been speaking almost in a whisper. Her disciple had been unable to read the full depths of the thought in her eyes. But now she rose, and walking up and down became once more the woman of affairs.

"Wherefore," said she, "we must not cease from pressing on Christ on earth the will of Christ in heaven. That will is this, that the Pope return to his sad and scattered people. For, see, if he come to Italy like a gracious father, offering a holy peace, those rebellious cities will lay their heads in his bosom ; and when with his own eyes he shall see the ruin of the Holy Church and the sins done by wicked and impure priests, how shall it be but that he shall uproot them all, and plant fragrant flowers in their stead in God's garden ? Then let him lift the gonfalon of Holy Cross, and lead the reconciled Christian peoples against the infidels."

"Who shall persuade him to these great things, my mother ?" said Neri, smiling against his will, since reverence for her holiness and mystic experiences had not yet inspired him with trust in her power as a practical reformer.

"Thou and I," replied Catherine with energy.

From downstairs came the cheery voice of Monna Lapa chatting with a neighbour. A little tame hen, dear to her, was strutting about the floor. Neri laughed aloud.

"Oh, you may dictate, and I will write," said he, "long letters to the holy father and to the Florentines. Small heed will they pay!"

"We shall do more than write," interposed Catherine.

"I understand that Avignon is an agreeable place," he went on bitterly. "It suits the King of France well that the head of Christendom should sojourn in his dominions. My uncle, Doctor Giovanni dei Pagliaresi, was sent by Siena, in the year 1367, to persuade Pope Urban to return to Rome. When he came home the Sienese did seize him in his house, and inflict on him a fine. Pope Urban came to Italy for a time, but too strong proved the charms of Provence, and what was well begun was ill ended. He returned, and the papacy is in Avignon yet. Is it Pope Gregory, an ailing Frenchman, who will bring to a close the captivity of seventy years? The great Dante died in grief for that the father of Christendom tarried far from the seat of Peter. Francesco Petrarca, true poet and true man, plead and strove in vain. Think you to succeed where these have failed?"

"I shall not cease from my continual prayer till the will of God be fulfilled," said Catherine calmly.

But the deep inner scepticism of her disciple, suppressed for months and years, had of late been rising to the surface against his will. He had entered under Catherine's guidance a hushed world, in which earthly values were ignored or forgotten, and the drama of the soul was all in all. Now, ever since the rebellion of the Tuscan cities led by exasperated Florence against the Pope, she had, as it were, forced him back from this spiritual sphere into the actual world of practical affairs and ecclesiastical politics. The shock was rude; he could as yet neither relate the two worlds in his mind, nor project force from the one into the other.

"Ask me not to help you in this high work," he sighed. "My heart is cold within. One longing torments me night

and day—to flee where I may know this turmoil and shame no more."

She looked at him searchingly.

"Wouldest thou, if I so counselled, enter the hermit's cell?" she asked with some anxiety.

Neri considered.

"No," he said after a moment of careful thought. "No, for it would be of no avail, and my peace were bitterness. In farthest desert I should ever hear the discord of the sins of men, the moaning of their need."

Catherine's face lightened with joy.

"The Lord has led thee higher since last we spoke of this matter," said she. "I think He is to lead thee higher yet. But for this the time is not come. Now is the time to stay in the world and give our sorrows and our labours to the honour of God and the salvation of souls."

"My mother," said he earnestly, stirred by her force of will and noble purpose, yet sceptical still. "You know how from my youth I have craved the Open Vision of the mysteries of God. To-day a deeper craving stirs within me. I believe I could, with patience, abide within my shadows did I only behold the Church of God clean, humble, and pure. You have schooled me well: I can live in darkness. But in the world outside my own soul I must see that I may act, and in that world is reflected my own confusion of mind."

"Is not duty clear, and the end of craving?" cried Catherine. "Do I not tell thee that the Lord hath said to me that when the Bride of Christ is reformed, the gain of the whole world shall follow?"

"Ay, when!" he sighed.

Then Catherine laid her hand on his, and spoke with strong conviction:

"Ours not to judge of the times when the end shall be attained; ours but to know that the end is true. Care not to present a finished work to God, who is infinite love, and demands from thee only infinite desire.

* * * * *

"Infinite desire!"—as sometimes happened, a phrase, a word unexpected and almost casual, seemed to the listener to

present him with the lost clue to life. "That can I give. That give I always," he murmured.

Still holding his hand, she turned him and herself to face a crucifix on the opposite wall.

"There gaze and gaze for ever," she said low. "Open thine eyes upon thy Lord to see His love for His Sweet Bride. For nails would not have held Him on the cross had love not held Him there. Still He cries that He is athirst; still hath He greater ardour and desire for our salvation that He shows us with His finished passion. My son, Raniero, I, who am thy mother chosen of God, tell thee that thou shalt hang beside him all thy life long on the cross of holy desire."

Neri had fallen on his knees, looking upward. Hot tears from some unknown depth of being, had overflowed his eyes.

"Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" he cried. His arms were outstretched toward the crucifix.

Catherine, standing above him, spoke with authority.

"I will," she said, "that thou consecrate to the service of the mystical Body of Holy Church the love and the desire gained from the contemplation of Christ crucified. Up, dear my son! Sleep no more! for God has placed thee in the battlefield as a knight to fight for His Bride, armed with the cuirass of thine own free-will; and no enemy shall ever wound thee unless with the weapon thou dost thyself put into his hand. Neri! thou shalt be transformed in the fire of very ardent charity, and become my messenger, to carry the word of God to our father, Christ on earth."

He had risen, and stood beside her; her words thrilled through his soul.

"I your messenger to Avignon?" he cried with kindling eyes. Then a last scruple stung—"I obey, my mother," he said tremulously; "yet am I one whose spirit is divided against itself. Such make bad messengers. Apart from your presence——"

"Speak not of my presence!" she cried impatiently. "Thou shalt leave me, as the apostles left our sweet Mother Mary, and went forth to the healing of the nations! This is no sudden resolve," she continued. "I have known for some days that I should send you to Avignon."

"Why not, Stefano?" he asked, with one final impulse of self-distrust. "Men do his bidding gladly. He were more fitting messenger by far."

"I would not spare Stefano from my side," replied Catherine; and Neri to his dismay felt a pang at the words. "But thou wilt not be alone. Father Raimondo is as thou knowest already at Avignon. It seems not that he hast met with much success."

Neri involuntarily arched his eyebrows a little.

"Doubtless thy fortune will be better," said she, with a serenity that might or might not have been ironic. "When thou reachest Avignon, thy first act will be to make thy confession to that holy priest——" Then, resuming her tone of full sympathy, she concluded: "This task is thine. I speak not of thy outward qualifications—the knowledge of the law, the excellent understanding of French, a wider familiarity with men than that of thy brothers in Christ. But I send thee because thou art one who knows my inmost mind, and, above all, because I perceive in thee the desire that is set to righteousness, not for thine own soul only, but for the sake of the whole world. Up, my son, and to the work! All that impedes thy good resolve is an illusion of the devil."

Neri left her presence exalted, liberated, and glad; for the prospect of high endeavour had lifted him out of his melancholy. His mind, overawed by Catherine's greater spirit, was for the time set free from that intellectual restlessness and moral incertitude, which against his will had grown upon him in the atmosphere in which she and her disciples moved. It was granted him to share her noble dream, and to see the vision which has sustained religious reformers throughout the ages; the purified Church a righteous society, comprising one great company of lovers under Christ the King of Love.

CHAPTER II

AT BOLOGNA

TOWARD the end of March, in the year 1376, Neri drew near to Bologna. The first plan had been for him to take the seas; but messages which Catherine desired to send to various points in North Italy caused her to advise him to change for the route by land. He would travel by the great Roman way, which, starting from Bologna at its base, connected Italy with far Provence.

It had been so far a joyous journey to one who, like Neri, found himself always helplessly buoyant in travel, from the mere delight in the onward way. Grieved by the sights that met his progress through devastated Italy, conscience schooled his lips to penitential devotions: none the less, there sang irrepressibly in his heart the song of the open road. There is exhilaration in any enlargement, however painful; the personal experience in which he had been absorbed for the last three years began to appear a small matter—a symbol at most in miniature of the turbulent drama of the age. All he saw and heard confirmed the dark situation he had lamented to Catherine; yet the fact of decision had soothed his bewilderment, and there was hope of action ahead. Meantime, he allowed himself to react passively to the impressions of the way. He was entertained with making acquaintances all along the route. Nothing in his graceful aspect betrayed the Religious, and people, not suspecting his errand, talked to him with the frankness to which excited times give birth. On all lips was the same tale—the unbearable tyranny of the Papal legates,

their mean extortions, their cold sensuality, their cruelty past belief. Everywhere he found the smouldering fire of a righteous wrath, almost everywhere the leaping flame of a high purpose. The cause of the League of Italian cities against the Pope was filling the young and ardent with chivalric passion. Passing the lower undulations of Tuscany, threading the valleys of the Apennines, descending into the levels of the Emilia, Neri met everywhere the blood-red Florentine banner, with its flashing motto "Libertas," awave in the souls of men. It fanned the fire of a patriotism which he was forced to recognise as pure, of that proud spirit of independence and hatred of oppression which had created the free cities of Italy. Not for the last time united protest against foreign tyranny was stilling petty strife and evoking the national consciousness which Dante, which Catherine, had vainly longed to see. Neri was shocked to find his own spirit swift to respond to the call. How otherwise? Was he not a Tuscan, partly Florentine? Was he not young? Was he not, too, a man to whom country and race were dear?

He pressed the letters of Catherine to his bosom. He was the loyal messenger of a holy Religious, bound for the Papal court on a mission aiming to break up the League and restore the Italian cities to the control of him, whom it sometimes seemed a little forced to deem, in the phrase dear to Catherine, "sweet Christ on earth." For the moment, the paradox did not distress him. Enough that he was under marching orders. Surely the time was coming when loyalty to church and country should be one! If only he might meet some outward test, he mused, some great trial in which to his own mind as to the world, his convictions might shine forth!

At Faenza, whither business of Catherine's drew him, he found the whole town hushed in agonized suspense. Sir John Hawkwood, the fierce English free-lance known to be in the pay of the Pope, hovered near, and rumour ran that the Bishop of Tarragona its sinister Governor, fearing disaffection, had delivered the place into his hands.

As Neri entered Bolognese territory, loathing hate of the

Papal legate, William of Noellet, snarled on every side. A day's journey from Bologna he encountered stirring news. The people of that city, instigated by the emissary from Florence, had risen in revolt, beset the palace within which Noellet, ever a timid man, had cowered, and finally driven him in derision from the city.

"This would be no time for any friend of the Holy Father to visit Bologna," remarked Neri's informant. "Indeed a simple traveller like yourself, messere, would better avoid the place during the next few days."

Neri expressed graceful thanks, and hurried his advance. From sheer interest in the scenes through which he was passing, he had loitered a trifle now and then, there being, indeed, no fixed date set for his arrival in Avignon. The warning just given was caculated to make him hasten to Bologna at once. There was no rash tempting of adventure in the instinct—at least, so Neri assured himself. His direct road led through the city; he was depending on the purchase of supplies there for his journey across the Alps.

Military rule, he saw as he drew near, obtained in the place. To the challenge of the sentry of the gate of Santo Stefano he gave his name, and "From Siena," repeated the soldier, calling the news back over his shoulder.

"From Siena!" the word passed on. Through the arched gate, Neri could see a clustering confusion of people. There was an aspect of disordered merriment about the crowded streets.

A tall horseman just inside the gate beckoned, and Neri, who had made the last stage of his travel on foot and unattended, slipped in.

"From Siena? Eh?" repeated the big man significantly. "Well friend, you bear no olive. Hardly the days these for the olive of peace to circulate in Italy." A snicker ran through the crowd. "But none the less we are free to perceive that you are a messenger, and all the more welcome."

"I know not for whom you take me," returned Neri, "but——"

"Are you not a messenger?" interrupted the large man.

A delighted audacity possessed Neri. Was the test come upon him?

"Certainly I am a messenger," he returned fearlessly, "but not to your rebellious city, messere."

The last part of his speech was either not heard or not heeded, for at the first loud applause broke out around. He found himself in an instant lifted upon a horse, surrounded by a laughing mob, and riding through the streets at the side of the leader.

"We will hear what he has to say at the Towers," shouted this last. "We can guess it well enough. High time that Siena join her sisters in the Holy League."

"Libertas! Libertas!" cried the crowd.

"Good travel to William of Noellet, who let our brothers starve."

"Down with foreigners! Italy for the Italians!"

"Down with the vicious priests who prey on us! No French Pope for Bologna!"

"News from Siena! Siena joins the League!"

Neri, in the midst of the clamour, was endeavouring to make himself understood, but his pure Tuscan was strange to Bolognese ears. He resigned him to silence, and was carried on, very detached, calm as the atom at centre of a cyclone, noting all the incidents of the way. He watched the streets, already beginning to assume that luxuriant picturesqueness of aspect so different from his severe and heroic Siena. The ancient clustered churches of San Stefano thrilled him with the sense of Christian life, perpetual from earliest days: he greeted the altar tombs of martyrs within as he passed them clattering by. Help of a different order came presently, as beyond converging streets he caught the unthinkable height of the Torre Asinelli mounting solemnly beyond all tumult into the unclouded sky. At the foot of the mighty companion tower—ever bowed, never falling—the cavalcade paused. Other pilgrims had passed this way. Neri, gazing upward, murmured the lines of Dante to himself:

> "Quale pare a riguardar la Carisenda,
> Sotto 'l chinato, quando un nuvol vada
> Sovr'essa si, ch'ella in contraria penda. . . ."

But silence had fallen on the crowd.

"Are you dreaming? Now tell your news!" his guide commanded.

"My news"—Neri spoke slow and clear, seeking to render his vowels nasal and his c's sibilant—"My news is this: Woe to those who set at nought the authority of Holy Church! Woe to those who drive forth her ministers and rulers; impatient of the Divine mysteries, unwilling to abide the time of God's sure justice! Repent ye, Bolognese, for that in your sinful hands ye have taken that judgment which belongs to God alone! Humble ye; return to your obedience! Change your wolfish hearts, and come like lambs to lay your heads in the bosom of your Shepherd, sweet Christ on earth, Pope Gregory XI!"

His high voice, steady and sweet despite its plaintive undertone, penetrated to the farthest limits of the crowd. The phrases of Catherine had unconsciously formed on his lips; he had seemed as he spoke to see her smiling at him. Yet all the time he was aware of another voice whispering to the inward ear a far different speech, suggesting words of felicitation, of high-hearted sympathy, of passionate love for Italy and freedom. Had he chosen or no the words of truth? He put the question by, and without qualms. Now was the time for action, not for scrutiny. From the fact that he had chosen the more difficult way, he felt, however illogically, reassured.

The crowd had listened to him with strained attention, thinking, probably, at first that they misunderstood the import of his words. As the unmistakable force of what he said reached them they gasped, turning on one another faces of dismay and wrath. Then the stillness broke. From his post on horseback Neri looked into a sea of faces, tumultuous, yet tossed by a terrible monotony of passion, and that passion was hate.

He said afterward that he was aware of the whole affair as of a picture, cognizant of himself as filling the centre of the stage, yet less agitated than he had often been during solitary spiritual conflicts with the Powers of Darkness.

Amazement at his words for a moment held the angry

crowd spellbound. Now they swayed and surged and rushed upon him. Sharply whispered, significantly murmured, shouted from lip to lip, passed suggestions dimly understood by the Tuscan of a special death he should die.

His rough escort, who seemed to bear him a certain goodwill, waved the crowd back.

"Wait! Let us first know more!" he called; and, turning to Neri: "Your errand in Bologna?"

"I am merely a peaceable traveller, whose road lay through the city," returned Neri coolly, willing to be prudent when no spiritual gain waited on another policy.

"Whither bound?"

Silence was as dangerous as truth.

"To Avignon," Neri made answer; and the growlings of the crowd, suspended for a moment, recommenced.

"You called yourself a messenger. Why?"

"Yes, I am a messenger"—Neri's emotion rose. "The messenger of a holy maid, of one who loves peace and follows it, who loves Italy, and would see this madness end. One who is pale with prayer and fasting and most ardent charity, and agonized desire that we Christians may be one, even as prayed Our Blessed Lord."

Something of Catherine's own exaltation illumined his delicate features as he spoke. Yearningly he stretched out his hands to the throng, looking, as he sat uplifted above them on his horse, like a visitant from some far land. His fearlessness, his spiritual passion, his youthful beauty, had their effect. Superstition—nay, perhaps a true religious compunction—began to work in his hearers. All might yet have been well. But, even while he was speaking these last words, there came riding down a side street a little band of mercenary soldiers, employed, it may have been, in the revolt of two days before, and the man at their head was Bernabo Rinaldini.

Neri gazed at him in surprise. He had known before leaving Siena that Bernabo had abruptly carried away his bride of a month to his seat in the mountains. There was nothing strange in his having left her there and betaken him to the fierce life of his choice. Nothing strange either in his turning up at any centre of disturbance like Bologna. What

was strange was the look of venomous and arrogant loathing that he fastened upon his kinsman.

"The man is harmless. We can let him go," said the big horseman at Neri's side.

The crowd was ready to acquiesce.

"We have no quarrel," called some one, "with holy virgins and their friends. Our quarrel is with proud prelates and men who poison the ear of our father the Pope against us."

"And with the Pope himself, who takes his ease afar, and sends robbers instead of shepherds to his people."

"Therefore," cried Neri, clear against the tumult, "am I bound to Avignon with messages from Catherine Benincasa, whom men call the Blessed One of the People, to the Holy Father. I am to tell him that all Italy weeps and groans and holds out hands of supplication. I am to beg him to have mercy, to grant Florence peace, to return to his mourning children. Yea, ye have suffered; yea, ye have borne great things; but ye have chosen the wrong remedy. Shall war be quelled by war or hate by hate? Not so, but by gentleness and holy peace alone shall the will of God prevail?"

Somewhere a woman sobbed. The tide of feeling was on the turn. But now Bernabo pressed his way to the front and began to speak. His wandering life had given him control of every Italian dialect, and he had thus an advantage over his kinsman. If Neri had a lingering hope of finding an ally in the husband of Ilaria he was soon undeceived.

"Look to what you do, Bolognese," shouted Bernabo. "That man is dangerous. He is a noble, violently opposed to the popular government, the hope of Siena. Did you ever know a noble who would not betray the people to the priests? I can give you proof. That 'holy maid' of whom he speaks is a madwoman—a vulgar creature of mean birth." Bernabo perceived his mistake, picked himself up, and went on with increasing vehemence: "I would say a daughter of the people, but false to her own, friend of the tyrant Salimbeni, a creature disowned for cause by all the decent of her own Order. As for Raniero de' Pagliaresi, with that smooth face of his, he is her minion, beguiler of women—I know it to my cost."

The menacing face had come nearer. It was close beneath Neri's horse. But the rider had slipped quickly to the ground, and the last words were still on the lips of the Rinaldini when Neri's sword was flashing in his eyes.

"Liar!" cried Neri, his face the colour of ashes.

For a good minute the kinsmen fought under the grim tower such fight as is to the death. Neri, the assailant, light and subtle with his weapon, was getting the better of the heavier man, when the throng closed in and pricking his sword-arm made him prisoner. He gazed around as one awakened from slumber.

But the spell of something unwonted about him which had held the people in abeyance was broken. They had seen the young prophet of peace fighting like other men.

"He is enemy to the League by his own confession!" called Bernabo, breathless.

The death of one young man, more or less, was not a matter to hesitate over long.

"Ay, ay! we should be fools to let him go," ran the assenting murmur. "How, then!"

And sinister suggestions, half understood by the Tuscan, buzzed in the air. He listened, dazed, and doubted his own hearing as he heard Bernabo presently say:

"What heard I, a moment back? It is known that the Florentines propose to flay alive him of Noellet in the streets. Do you hate Papal emissaries less in Bologna?"

The man who had accosted Neri at the gate interposed, seemingly, a lively protest; discussion raged hot. Still that great height of the Carisenda Tower rose into the upper calm. But presently the people, yelling now, fierce lust of blood in their eyes, pushed toward one of the little shops that clung around the tower's base. Carcases of animals, skinned and quartered, ornamented with camellias, proudly adorned the entrance, and showed in the dusk within. A moment's hissed colloquy, and the butcher came out in his apron. A long knife glittered in his hand.

Neri bowed his head, murmuring the name of Catherine, and that of One more holy.

Suddenly, a window opened in one of the palaces that

surrounded the little square. A young man of scholarly, not quite Italian, face was looking out.

"Gentlemen," he called in clear tones that arrested instant attention, "your manners here in Bologna render very difficult a peaceful attention to one's studies."

A laugh ran through the crowd.

"What is the matter here? Qu'est-ce qui se fait?" continued the young man at the window.

Hearing the French, Neri looked up with the rest. Always inclined to amusement at incongruous times, he called out, smiling, in the same tongue:

"Pray do not interrupt your studies, monsieur. They are going to flay me alive, that is all."

"Judging from your aspect, and your excellent French, that would be a pity," returned the other. Then, taking in the situation with a keen glance, he spoke more rapidly, still in French and very low: "Back up as close as you can to the entrance of the palace."

Turning, he said a few swift words to one within; then, leaning further out of the window, continued deliberately his talk with the crowd, which, having Neri safe, was not ill-pleased to amuse itself for a moment.

"Really, you do not deserve your university," he complained. "If there is any more racket outside——"

And at this point, without transition, he raised a terrible whoop that made the whole crowd start.

"The Carisenda! It sways—it will fall!" he shouted, pointing, trembling, his glassy eyes raised to the summit of the leaning mass.

The throng, with a moan of terror, veered and turned to a man; Neri, too, turned, but in an opposite sense, catching a glimpse of Bernabo crouched, hands clasped to head. So wholly inert had the prisoner been since disarmed that the hold on him was slack. He squirmed with agility from his captors, and slipping into the shadow of the Gothic entrance, perceived in the dusk a small side-door swung ajar, through which showed a beckoning hand. He flung him inward, helped by a friendly arm. The door creaked heavily behind him. He was in darkness and in safety.

CHAPTER III

GREEK MAGIC

Midway up the stairs his rescuer met him, and the two exchanged greetings, in French, as elaborate as if the occasion had been conventional.

"It is a pleasure to hear anyone speak my native tongue as well as you do, monsieur," said the young scholar.

"Monsieur," returned Neri, "I were happy did I possess half the ease in it which is yours in Italian."

"It is my duty, as secretary to my uncle, Cardinal Guillaume de Chanac, to possess a knowledge of the tongues," replied his new friend. "It is also my joy as a student of men, for, with Dante, I do not despise the vulgar medium."

He had led the way up into the apartment which dominated the street, a small, bare room filled with rolls of parchment, neatly piled on tables and shelves. Through the still open window came the roar of the mob; wrath and bewilderment mingled in their clamour.

"It will be as well not to show ourselves at the window," said the secretary tranquilly. "They will forget you and scatter before long. You are, I need hardly inform you, entirely at home here. I beg you to consider this house as your own."

Neri bowed, but the light that had been in his face was faded. His host eyed him curiously.

"While in danger, monsieur," he remarked, "I observed that you were of peculiarly joyous aspect. Now, in security, apprehension has overspread your features."

Neri raised his eyes with the guileless look of a child.

"I drew my sword," he said simply, "and I cannot be sure that it was in self-defence."

The other stared, incredulous and entertained.

"What of it?" he queried. "But as for self-defence, I should say there was need enough, with a whole city at your back."

Neri shook his head.

"It was the speech of a man I know that made me lose myself," said he; "but I crave your pardon. This regret is my own, and need not burden you."

"How quiet that crowd is of a sudden!" remarked the other. He drew discreetly near to the window and peered out. "I do not understand," said he; "many have already gone, and those who remain are hushed. The dark man with whom you fenced is crossing himself vigorously. I see several people on their knees. 'Varium et mutabile semper'—the humours of a mob are always like those of a woman."

Neri, having roused himself, was bent over the table by which the other had been sitting. A very brown manuscript, carefully unrolled and fastened for perusal, lay upon it. The secretary, turning, watched him an instant; then unrolled the parchment very carefully a little farther, that more of the characters might be seen.

"What do you think of my treasure?" he asked almost anxiously.

His guest, without replying, scrutinized the roll gravely with keen puzzled interest.

"Only once," he said at last, "have I seen anything like this. It was a manuscript lent for a brief time to a doctor at the University of Perugia. He showed it privately to me and to one other favoured pupil. It was, as he told us—Greek."

He looked inquiringly at the other, who nodded.

"It is Greek," he said with reverence, and the two young heads bent together over the cracked parchment.

Neri looked up with awe in his eyes.

"Can you read it?" he inquired.

The other shook his head.

"Not yet. The aim of my life is to gain the power. I have the alphabet. That was taught me by a wandering scholar from Constantinople. But he was a restless soul, and roamed away to Paris before I had time to learn more. You do not, perhaps, possess the knowledge?"

"Would that I did!" was Neri's fervent answer.

"When I saw you from the window," remarked his new friend regretfully, "the thought crossed my mind that you might be a wandering Greek. Well, I am doing what I can, transcribing the whole document into Latin characters."

Neri picked up the copied page handed him and read at random:

"hēdekatharōstekaimetriōstonbiondiexelthousakaixunemporōnkaihēgemonōntheōntuchousaōkēsentonautēhekastētoponprosēkontaeisi" . . . .

"How peculiar a speech!" he exclaimed; "it looks like no tongue spoken by man, yet strangely alluring. Surely, to utter it were to invoke strange powers from a realm unseen! Know you aught of the sounds?"

The secretary shook his head.

"Nothing! nothing!" he cried with passionate regret. "I touch this parchment; for hours I gaze upon it; letter by letter I copy it. It never yields its secrets, nor am I of those who feel that use as incantation would bring them forth. Those secrets I must have, but how?"

"Do you at least know what the manuscript is?" asked Neri.

"Yes. It is the dialogue called Phaedo, of the philosopher Plato," the other made answer. "And see here!" With infinite precaution he showed something written on the back. "Petrarch's autograph!" he said triumphantly.

"Would you allow me," Neri spoke after a moment's pause, "to hold this treasure in my hands?" His voice trembled a little.

The other, with equal gravity, assented. Neri received the precious parchment almost as if it had been the relic of a saint, and the two young men stood silent in the waning light.

"In that vellum which you hold," said the Frenchman at last, "in those strange characters, lies hidden a new world, a world of thought, new and yet very old, a civilization nobler than our own, for lack of which we die."

Neri, if he marvelled a little, held his peace.

"Petrarch could not read his own treasure," continued the other at last. "But better times are coming. I hope to help them come."

"Monsieur," said Neri impulsively, "I already owe you my life. The gift would become beyond measure more valuable to me would you add to it another—would you teach me the Greek alphabet."

The young scholar's face glowed with pleasure.

"Nothing would give me more delight!" he exclaimed. "You shall remain here with me hidden for two or three days; it will be the safest course for you. I will teach you the alphabet; we will hold pleasant converse. You shall see more of my treasures—there are sixteen of these Greek manuscripts of Petrarch's——"

But Neri's face had clouded.

"I spoke too hastily," he sighed. "To-morrow I must be on my way to Avignon."

"To Avignon?" repeated the other with surprise. "Well, well! But you will not find it easy to leave the city unmolested. We will discuss these things at supper," he added.

The meal was not far progressed before Neri had learned all about his new friend, Luigi, or Louis, de Frontaigne, citizen evidently of a wider world than Neri had ever known. The Frenchman's conversation delighted his new acquaintance, yet filled him with vague discomfort, a discomfort over the cause of which Neri puzzled in vain. At a later period of their intercourse he decided it to be due to the personal detachment which the young man evinced toward all the topics—political, artistic, literary, theological even—which he discussed with equally keen interest.

It behoved Neri to give an account of himself in turn; he was annoyed, having mentioned his name, to find the further task very difficult. His host had evidently heard

nothing of his words in the piazza. How inspiriting had it been there to proclaim himself the disciple of a holy maid, the crowd gaping below, the heavens shining above, and martyrdom near! How impossible to explain himself in this quiet room to the suave lover of Greek manuscripts! Two or three times Neri had made the effort, and each time had failed.

"You spoke of Perugia," said de Frontaigne. "At what other Universities have you studied?"

"At none out of Italy," Neri replied. "Since the days of my uncle, Giovanni de' Pagliaresi, who was professor of law at Perugia, members of my family have always prosecuted their studies there."

"I have seen the monument of the founder of your house in San Francesco, Siena," said his host politely. "The inscription, if I remember, runs: 'Legibus invictus doctor, dottrinis pollens, miranda corona Senensis.' Perhaps you, like myself, prefer to any University training the instruction of independent scholars," he added. "Their minds are apt to have more living freshness."

"I have never known any such men," said Neri. "Indeed, monsieur de Frontaigne, I can lay claim neither to the scholar's training nor to the scholar's mind."

"I must be excused from doubting your word when I look at your brow," was the answer. "The passion for truth sits on it."

"And can truth be won only by way of scholarship?" queried Neri.

An intellectual light kindled in Louis' face.

"Scholarship, art, action," he retorted. "And these three, alas! agree not in one."

"And faith?" But for some reason it was of his own mind, not of Louis, that Neri asked this question.

"Though I saw you engaged in a fray," meditated his host, "I do not think that yours is the way of action; but it may well be the way of art. Many of the best artists at Avignon for the last fifty years have come from Siena. If you are on your way to help adorn us, however, may I beg you to spare the old French work—what little is left, at

least? I hope you will like the hunting scene that makes the tiled floor in the chamber of the Fleeing Stag. The colours are to my eyes most harmoniously gay, and pleasantly in keeping with the books kept in that apartment. It is a small room, but adequate to house the very small amount of secular literature in the Papal library, which has, alas! among its two thousand volumes over two hundred copies of St. Thomas, and but two of Virgil! I am peculiar in regretting the destruction of the frescoes by Pierre du Puys. They cannot have had the exquisite design nor the melting languor of the works of your Martini and of Matteo di Viterbo which replaced them, but from all I hear they must have possessed rare brilliancy of colouring and a certain sprightliness agreeable to the eye. I am told his martyrs went most elegantly to their doom."

"Is Avignon a good place in which to look for truth?" asked Neri absently. He had paid scant attention as Louis ran on.

De Frontaigne cocked his head on one side.

"You will find there scholarship at its height," he answered. "Art also at its height. As for action—at least, the place is the centre of the drama of Europe. Concerning truth"—he drummed on the table, then looked up frankly—"I am more intimate with that word in the plural than in the singular," he avowed. "If you are seeking for truths, you will find at Avignon opportunity to study life in a greater variety of aspects than anywhere else in the world. Every order of phenomena can be found there, except one."

"And that one?" queried Neri.

"Religion," answered Louis de Frontaigne.

Neri made a sharp movement.

"I must certainly start on the morrow," said he with decision. "I am bound on a mission which should brook no delay."

"Will you accept me for a travelling companion?" asked the other.

Neri's face betrayed surprise and transparent pleasure, tinged, however, with hesitation.

"Within the next few days, I was myself to start for

Avignon," explained de Frontaigne. "My errand here is done; it was simply to secure these manuscripts of Petrarch's for my uncle's library. Now, you cannot wisely cross the Alps alone; nor, you will allow me to say, can you without madness appear in the city in your own person for some time to come. What are you laughing at, Andrea?"

The old servitor, who was waiting on them, was visibly entertained.

"It would, indeed, be a pity for messere to appear; it would spoil an excellent miracle," he chuckled.

"What do you mean?" asked both young men together.

The old man shook with voiceless laughter.

"Why, when messere so suddenly vanished before their eyes, as it were, they were all dazed; then some of the women cried out that he must have been one of the blessed saints in person. Their own Saint Petronius, say some; others favour the idea of the archangel St. Michael. The town is full of rumour. Carisenda will fall to-night; it would have fallen already, but the saint has graciously interceded with the Madonna to show mercy; on the contrary, he demands the destruction of the rebellious city. Only one thing is sure—the miracle. The churches are crowded with penitents; half the citizens are in favour of abandoning the new republic, and asking forgiveness of the Pope. The tall dark man with whom messere fought is the devil himself; he, too, has disappeared, so it is evident he was no earthly creature."

Neri had turned grave; but Louis de Frontaigne threw back his head and joined in Andrea's laughter.

"Just like these Bolognese!" he remarked. "One of your Tuscan mobs would never be so dull, nor would my Parisians. You see that you must not spoil the miracle. Listen! I can easily hasten my preparations, and start to-morrow at dawn. You can slip through the gate disguised as my attendant. We shall have ample time on the road to Avignon to learn the Greek alphabet, and even, if it please you, to discuss ways of finding truth. Nay, monsieur," he went on, speaking seriously, as Neri hesitated, "I will take no denial.

I, of course, now perceive that you are a diplomatist. I do not see why I did not guess it before. The reading of men's faces is, as you may have guessed, a hobby of mine; but if there is that in your face which agrees with your profession, there is that also which denies it. Let me now assure you—and I speak as one man of the world to another—that you need have no fear of finding me indiscreet. To know you is sufficient assurance that your mission is important and delicate. I shall make no effort—and for this I give you my word of honour—to ascertain its character. Whether you are an envoy from your city government, from the party of the great nobles, or from some other, high in rank and place, I shall never inquire. You may trust my reserve, monsieur."

But Neri had risen to his feet.

"Monsieur," he said, "I have absolutely nothing to conceal. Nor do I know what unworthy impulse has made me evade, so far, your just and kind interest. I am bound—I am the disciple"—it was hard to find the words. He tried again. "I am one of the spiritual family of a holy maid—a Dominican tertiary consumed with passionate desire that the woes of Italy should have an end. As you are the secretary of Cardinal de Chanac, so am I of this virgin. She has sent me to the Holy Father with letters entreating him to offer peace on favourable terms to the rebellious cities of the League, and to heal the wounds of Italy by return to the seat of Peter."

He stammered a little, and knew that he flushed. As he spoke he was seeing his errand in a new light. How absurdly naïf it seemed in the presence of Louis de Frontaigne's intelligent face! That face had altered subtly, losing a little—or so Neri's sensitiveness imagined—the look of camaraderie; but it was with great politeness that Louis answered:

"You interest me extremely," said he. "Is this virgin a learned woman?"

"She cannot write," returned Neri. "She is wise as she is ignorant."

"And how is that?"

Neri was determined to stand by his colours.

"The Sweet Primal Truth holds with her direct converse," he made reply.

"Ah!"—Louis spoke thoughtfully? "Through visions, perhaps? And miracles, it may be? And trances?"

Neri signed assent.

His new friend rested his elbows on the table and looked at him musingly for a full moment in quizzical silence.

"I am very glad," he remarked at last, "that you are going to Avignon. In the light of what you tell me," he went on, "I think that you must perceive a cogent reason for slipping away quietly. A miracle has been wrought in favour of your cause. If you desire the pacification of the Italian cities you could not, had you tried, have played a cleverer turn. Do not disturb it by reappearing on the scene."

Neri moved as one in pain, and Louis de Frontaigne scrutinized him kindly, but still with that quizzical look.

"It is a rare and exquisite thing to see a disciple of monks and nuns hurt by the suggestion of a lie," he observed. "No, do not be angry, monsieur Neri. If we are to be travelling companions you will soon find that I speak out my thought, when so pleased, with frankness. And now we must snatch a few hours rest before our early start. You see yourself that if you are to proceed on your errand you have no choice but to accept my offer."

CHAPTER IV

THE OPEN ROAD

Across the Italian peninsula, over the barrier of Apennines and Alps, following the most beautiful coast-line in the world, above a sea that glowed from rose to violet and unbelievable greens all melting into unity of lapis lazuli, and finally down into white Provence where the atmosphere heaved with the pulsing intensity of the sun, Neri travelled with Louis de Frontaigne. Never had he known anything like that journey. On his solitary way to Bologna enjoyment had indeed trapped him unaware and half-ashamed; now it enfolded him triumphantly. Painful broodings forgotten, thought and sight were suffused alike with the radiance of new impressions.

There could be no more stimulating travelling companion than de Frontaigne. Neri, by his side, found himself surveying the world from points of view before undreamed of. For two years he had contemplated life from one fixed centre of religious conviction. Now, albeit he guarded that conviction inviolate in his heart, he allowed his imaginative intellect to be decentralized and wander at will. It was an intense relief. For the mind craves freedom as much as the heart craves constancy; and from their conflicting desires springs the drama, often deepening into tragedy, of the interior life. But there was no tragic hint for the present. Introspection was forgotten, and inconsistencies ceased to annoy as body and soul pursued their adventurous way.

Anyone living with Louis de Frontaigne might indeed come to hold inconsistency the only consistent attitude for an

unprejudiced mind. For Louis, extremely eager to observe, cared little to co-ordinate. He had no sympathy with the logic of the schools by which Neri had so carefully tried to guide his thought. That vast, synthetic work of classification, the effort to fix a given number of phenomena into one coherent scheme, which had occupied the Middle Ages, interested him not one whit. The exercise of reason meant to him no mere playing with mental machinery—it was direct personal contact with reality of some kind. What he craved was new phenomena, and he found them at every turn. Now the constructive principles of the tall bell-towers rising like blossom stalks from the plain and hill engaged his attention ; now the deflections from Virgilian phrasing in the Latin epic of Petrarch. Traversing Italy, he discoursed on the condition of the Italian peasantry — more prosperous, he assured Neri, in spite of the disordered state of the country, than the same class in any other part of Europe. As they crossed the Alps he was all eagerness over the engineering of the road, and insisted on illuminating his comrade with schemes of new audacious possibilities, involving no mean knowledge of the mathematics. For one long spring day, as they journeyed among the sharp cliffs and steep olive slopes of the Riviera, he scornfully analyzed Arabian glosses to the philosophy of Aristotle. Neri, as he followed with delight these fascinating mental excursions, became aware that his prospect was widening in three directions. The reverence for the classic past already revealed in their first evening—for the literature of Rome, already opened—for that of Greece, divined and ardently desired—was perhaps the most recurrent enthusiasm of de Frontaigne. Yet he was also alive to the study of natural phenomena on the one hand, and again to such interest in human types as was to lead not only to the later psychology, but also to non-partisan investigation of all that concerned statecraft and the social arts. These interests in antiquity, in natural law, and in human institutions, combined, his hearer dimly perceived, to form a new attitude. Its significance could hardly be apprehended as yet. It was at all events refreshing and liberating to one who, like Neri, had for years groped in search of reality exclusively

among the evasive phenomena of the unseen world, and who half-consciously had been restless of late,—oppressed with a curious sense of insufficiency by those intellectual concepts and interests derived from St. Thomas and ultimately from St. Augustine, among which his chosen companions lived.

Only once, till near the end of their journey, was Neri's avowal of his mission touched on. When they had gone a day's journey, he despatched a letter to Bologna. Louis, true to his promise, asked no questions, but his companion handed it to him.

"Messer Raniero di Landoccio of the Pagliaresi of Siena"—so ran the missive—"having been inhospitably received by the Bolognese, who threatened to flay him in their streets because he spoke the words of truth and soberness, now begs to inform the government of that city that he is safe and sound, thanks to the stratagem of a friend, and on his way to Avignon, where he purposes to plead with Pope Gregory to deal with his rebellious sons according to the laws of mercy."

"By this letter you forfeit the advantage to your cause of a reputed miracle," said de Frontaigne, raising his eyebrows.

"That was my purpose," returned Neri. "Shall God's cause be served by a lie?"

"It has been served by murder of late," observed de Frontaigne. "Did not the soldiers of Hawkwood, as we have this day heard, cry, 'Long live the Church!' while they massacred them of Faenza?"

"The devil, when it suits his purpose, can fight in the Holy Name!" cried Neri. "As there! As then!"

"You grieve too bitterly over the news," said Louis calmly. "It is not pleasant, to be sure, to hear of a bishop forcing shrieking women back upon the point of the sword. But we must look at such episodes largely. How, except for occasional violence and constant fraud, do you suppose, my dear friend, that the authority of the Church Catholic is to be maintained in Europe?"

"By the grace of the Holy Spirit of God, who is with her to the world's end!" replied Neri devoutly.

And Louis, looking at him once more with an expression

of affectionate amusement, turned the conversation to the poetic traditions lingering in Provence.

As they left Italy behind, horrors faded from their mind, and Neri's spirits became constantly higher. He had escaped from engrossing family anxieties into a larger air. The glory of the natural world, in which he was seeing one of the most lovely portions at the perfect moment, lifted him into bewildering ecstasy. Catherine, too, loved the country; more than once, as on the walk to Lecceto, Neri had shared her delight in trees, and blossoms, and sweet air. But Nature was to her an allegory, suggesting at each turn the Christian mysteries. Neri had entered with sympathy into this method of interpretation; yet on this journey, his spirit, without knowing it, derived from the outer world something thrilling and vital, unrelated to his conception of the Christian scheme; no series of arbitrary associations, but a direct revelation of life, nowhere otherwise vouchsafed. Particularly in the ruder portions of the mountain journey, his very body vibrated with joy. The sedate Famiglia would have gazed helplessly at their whilom despondent comrade as he hastened hither and yon in search of new flowers or enticing points of view, or even, though within bounds which had seemed moderate to a modern, scaled unnecessary heights. But Louis was possessed by a like spirit, and the two young men, leaving the mule-train behind, courted merrily the adventures of the way.

"I see in your eyes that you wish to climb that little peak," said Neri one day, pointing to a craggy pinacle.

Louis nodded, laughing.

"I shall restrain myself, however," he answered. "You, who are good at calculating distance, can judge that the climb would involve two or three hours, and the sun is dropping."

"Why," queried Neri, "do we wish to do a thing which is of service to no other human being, and of peril to ourselves? A friend, who has preceded me to Avignon"—he was thinking of Fra Raimondo—"wrote that the journey was fearsome and horrible; but the rudeness of the way moves you and me to hilarity. True, I was bred in a

hill-country. I have known but one other before you who shared my love for the heights," he sighed dreamily, "and she sought the high grassy slopes where the cyclamen grows above the olives, rather than the rocks and snows."

"Ah! She?" smiled de Frontaigne. "No, no; you need not explain, my young disciple of a nun, nor flush, though that rose-colour vastly becomes your cheeks."

"The lady of whom I speak is my cousin," said Neri. "Together, as children, we spent our summers in the Tuscan hills."

"And now?" asked Louis.

"Now," said Neri, "she is the wife of the man who sought my life at Bologna. Since her marriage I have never seen her," he added, in reply to a subtle expression that crept into de Frontaigne's face; "it is probable that I shall never see her more."

Louis, being a person of tact, reverted to the earlier subject.

"I, also," said he, "till I met you, had known but one person who shared the mountain-madness, but that one was Francesco Petrarca. I will show you at Avignon a delightful letter of his, which I copied. It describes his ascent of Mount Ventoux, the Windy Hill, which is our nearest mountain; nothing to these amazing heights, yet, I believe, a good climb."

"Can we not ascend it together?" cried Neri.

"Surely, if you have time for such frivolities at Avignon," Louis smiled; "and if you do not find leisure for frivolities, you will be a rare figure in the town."

* * * * *

"You are very silent to-day," said de Frontaigne.

The Alps were left behind, and they were riding through the flat glare of Provence.

"Dreaming of Avignon," Neri replied.

"What see you when you dream of that city? It would interest me to know," the other asked.

"I dream of Avignon," Neri answered slowly, "but it is Rome I see—as I have seen it often—small and exceedingly mournful,—the wilderness in its rank beauty invading

palaces and streets. I see the Lateran, 'of all Churches Head and Mother,' see it as when I was there last, roofless, a pillared loneliness. Grass grew on the steps of the High Altar; a shepherd of the Campagna sat watching his flock that nibbled in the nave. Ah! where, even then, I asked me, where is the Shepherd of all Christendom, through whose desertion the field of martyrs has become a waste?"

"Strange!" Louis mused. "The power of that little town, huddled affrighted amid the majesty of wide Imperial ruins, marble clad! Rome!—'tis but a memory, a desolation, and a dream; yet the power of that dream outlasts the ages!"

"And shall!" Neri cried with fervour. "Small, neglected, sorrowful, she is yet the holy city, mother of the souls of men."

"For myself," said Louis quietly, "I do not entertain that conception. I question whether the idea of a special sanctity possessed by the city of the Cæsars be not destined to vanish from intelligent minds."

Neri caught his breath, for the thought struck him with painful novelty.

"It had not vanished from the mind of Petrarch," he retorted with heat.

"Nor from that of Dante," de Frontaigne agreed. "Yet these great spirits are alike of the past."

"Then you do not believe"—Neri's voice trembled a little—"that the Pope should return to Rome?"

The other smiling shook his head.

"Our politics are opposed," he said lightly. "Remember that I am more than half French."

Neri looked disappointed, yet relieved.

"I had dreamed of a time"—he sighed, feeling for his words as one groping in regions unexplored—"when some, at least, shall think from the point of view of the whole, instead of the part to which they belong. My mother holds ever in her holy desire, not Siena alone, but Italy—nay, but Christendom! So teaches her the Sweet Primal Truth. And you, I had almost supposed——"

"Were free from party heat as a Dominican nun?" Louis interrupted, a little nettled. "Well then, since audacities are in order and there is none to hear, I speak my mind.

Avignon is a far more natural centre than Rome for the intellectual life of Europe. Though why that life should gather around the Papal See, I for one fail to see."

Neri turned suddenly on his friend.

"Louis," said he, "do you despise the Church?"

De Frontaigne met him with instant seriousness.

"Far from it," said he. "How could I despise the institution which, when Europe was overrun with barbarian hordes, preserved for us all we possessed of the literature of the ancient world?"

"And is that all?" asked Neri anxiously.

"Deny the chief political force in Europe? Surely not! I have been meaning to tell you, Neri"—de Frontaigne concluded—"that it is my intention to take priest's orders during the next few weeks."

Old habit was strong in Neri; the mystic light leaped into his eyes.

"Thanks be to Our Lady!" he cried; then came upsurging doubt, and smothering it as he might, he thought aloud: "All must be well. Your words are strange at times; they touch within me somewhat that pains—quick with life, but life, I fear, unholy. But what are words? My own, I have been told, are full often bitter and grievous to the simple. I have ever been prone to say the contrary to my thought, confident that the friend will understand, desirous that the stranger be barred out from my soul's city. Well I know that the faith which rules that city abides by preference enshrined in secret, far from clamour of profaning tongues. So it must be with you. Blessed are you, and great your dignity; you shall feed the people of Christ with the food of angels. Bear with me that I say it this once; tell me but once that you give God thanks for His mercy! Or no, tell me nothing. Is it I who press a friend to utterance? Say nothing, only let me hear your soul in the silence adoring with my own."

As Neri spoke, de Frontaigne had been watching with grave, sad attention the light of feeling delicately at play in his friend's face. Now, as he answered, he turned his own gaze to the horizon.

"I have a great desire," he said slowly, "that our intimacy should continue. What I shall now say will imperil it; nevertheless, it shall be said. It is, I believe, what many men in our day are feeling, though few, perhaps, have phrased it to themselves, and none, it may be, have brought the thought to birth in common speech."

He paused, knitting his brows, and resumed:

"The Church! We are bidden to perceive therein the Body of the Lord Christ. But what is it we see? The best mechanism for controlling men manipulated by human intelligence. You bid me regard the priesthood in Italy, for example, as a holy people, leaders of the folk of God in the midst of an evil world?"

He shrugged his shoulders, laughing, and awaited an answer; but his friend was silent.

"The Church!" he continued, in accents more incisive than his wont. "It gains its hold on men by professing an impossible ideal, and retains its power by persecuting all who sincerely follow its profession. You will find the followers of Peter Waldo still numerous at Avignon. Under their breath they still quote violent sayings, such as would be condemned by ecclesiastical courts had they not inconveniently been uttered by the Lord of Peter. Honest disciples of one Francis Bernardone also flourished once in the town; since the days of that genial father of Christendom, John XXII., the place knows them no more."

> "'Ma tu, che sol per cancellare, scrivi,
> Pensa che Pietro e Paulo, che moriro
> Per la vigna che guasti, ancor son vivi,'"

quoted Neri with spirit.

Louis nodded approval of the quotation.

"The accusing voice of Dante's Imperial Eagle does not reach from the radiance of Jove to our earthly courts, however," he continued. "The policy of John remains the wisdom of the Church militant. It will apply to your spiritual mother, as to those who have gone before. One of two things is sure. The Church she seeks to serve will pervert her, or work her death."

"She asks to lay down her life for it," Neri murmured, and added mournfully: "Wherever we looked, she and I, we beheld but the corruption and shame of the ministers of the Sacred Blood. Almost, I could wish the Church poor, persecuted, powerless, as when first her Lord had died!"

"Rank heresy, but in good company," said Louis calmly; "that of Dante Alighieri, for example. But it is no heresy of mine. A Church with no lust of temporal power is unthinkable by man. The 'Great Refusal' of Pope Celestine is evidence enough, as even Dante dimly felt, that the Church needs statesman, not saint, for her leader. And since authority must be, men being evidently incapable of governing themselves without severe control, as well thus as otherwise. For myself, however," he concluded, "I have no wish to govern. I become a priest simply because the clerical life is the most convenient means of commanding scholarly leisure."

He had wheeled round, and faced his friend with a little defiance in the gaze. But if he expected to find Neri's expression shocked, he was disappointed. The Tuscan's eyes were shining, and fixed afar.

"The Church shall yet be healed!" he exclaimed. "Yet shall she be seen, purged of her sins, fair as a bride adorned for her husband! To that end I shall labour till I die!"

"But what if she be in her nature what you call corrupt, what I call human?" pressed Louis.

Again the startled look crept into the other's eyes.

"But if the Church be as you say, if she be not the Body of Christ," he mused, "how is the Divine life communicated to the world?"

The sun had set. Filmy rose-clouds brooded in an amethyst mist over the grey levels of Provence.

"You will not understand," said Louis gently. "Your language of theology is alien to me. I am interested in what may be investigated and proved of man. Your schoolmen speak of an inward sense of sin, of a world given over to darkness. They tell of God coming to earth in human likeness, to make atonement for a fault, nevertheless

decreed of Him from the beginning. I do not deny that these things may be so ; I cannot affirm them. But to me they are of small interest. I do not care for those far lights, revealed only when the spirit walks in darkness. The stars are fair, but I would rather walk in thought's sunlight, and study the world on which it shines—a world how infinite in variety ! So did the ancients, in the bright morning of time ; on us, to-day, I dare to think, another dawn is brightening."

Despite himself, he watched for some sign of understanding. But Neri, wrapped in his own thought, had not heeded his friend's word.

"Or is there, then, no Divine life ?" he said, still very quiet.

The rose had gone, but the whole sky was flooded with pale gold, in which the evening star shone silver. Of a sudden the air was full of the sweet chiming of innumerable bells. Louis swept the horizon with his arm.

"Is not this enough ?" he asked.

But Neri, head bared and bowed, was repeating the *Salve Regina*.

Louis waited till his friend's devotions were finished, then spoke, lightly but bitterly.

"Yonder is Avignon," said he, pointing to a group of towers in the distant plain that cut sharp into the glory of the sky. "Thence those carolling bells that stir you to prayer are ringing. It is always well, I fancy, not to draw too near to what stimulates our devotion. Will you turn back ? There is yet time."

"There is the home of Christ on earth," sighed Neri.

De Frontaigne shrugged his shoulders.

"You will find your Christ on earth a somewhat pitiable gentleman," he answered, with a touch of impatience.

CHAPTER V

THE TOWN OF CHRIST ON EARTH

The city gates closing at sunset, the two friends spent the night without the town. Neri caught his breath the next morning at the imposing aspect of the place. In the young sunshine its many towers were no longer phantom intruders of the sky, but a dominant fact. The machicolated heights, the encircling ramparts, the stern surfaces of the great fortress palace of the Popes rose proudly, impregnable in situation, a massive witness to the power of a Church literally militant here below. Under the broad bridge built centuries ago by St. Bénézet, flowed slowly the wide, turbid Rhone ; and upon the bridge, even at this early hour, another river of humanity, hardly more intermittent, was moving. Many a clerk and prelate was there, superbly arrayed, mounted on horses gay with princely trappings. Fair ladies took the freshness of the day. Pilgrims with staff and shell trudged merrily or wearily on, bound for St. James of Galicia, or it might be for Holy Land. Jewish merchants, serious of face, bore packs probably containing, Louis explained, priceless manuscripts for sale. A band of French students, singing boisterously a ribald Goliardic catch against the clergy, faced south for Italy. They crossed an Italian professor, northward bound, probably to some University chair. For Avignon was on the high road binding France, England, and Flanders to Italy and the East ; and Europe in motion passed incessantly through its streets. The image of Rome in her desolation recurred, vague as a ghost, to Neri's mind, and vanished before this city of the present, unhaunted by memories, radiant in the morning air.

Fra Raimondo, apprised by courier of their coming, was eagerly on the watch within the gate. He embraced his fellow-disciple fervently on both cheeks, impeding the while the movement of the crowd. Neri, annoyed at his own annoyance, gave the excellent man an extra salute, which caused him to beam with delight.

"You are well? But to see you answers the question. And in what state you have travelled!" Fra Raimondo looked with admiration at the modest train of the politely-expectant Louis de Frontaigne. "I have had letters by sea from our mother since you left. God is showing most singular graces to her soul. On the first of April——"

"I must not keep my friend," interposed Neri gently. "Let me present him, and then we will be gone."

He had declined Louis's pressing wish to have him as a guest, unwilling to disappoint the good father. Now, threading the streets with Raimondo he was very homesick for a lost companionship. The delightful life which, for the last few weeks, he had so eagerly appropriated, suddenly seemed alien to the whole old order of thought and feeling which Fra Raimondo represented. He summoned all powers of loyalty, of disciplined sympathy to his aid, and not without success.

As the first brightness induced by their meeting faded, he found that the priest, always of a despondent disposition, was all but hopeless over their common mission. Certainly, the moment of Neri's arrival was unpropitious! Far from conciliating the rebellious Tuscan cities, the ecclesiastical courts, only a few days before, had pronounced rigorous sentence upon Florence. Interdict and excommunication were to be her lot,—her sons to be treated as infidels, their persons and substance liable to confiscation. Raimondo had been present. He described vividly the scene when Donato Barbadori, leader of the Florentine ambassadors, had turned from the Pope, flung him prostrate at the foot of the crucifix, and in agitated voice and terrible, that moved the bystanders to tears, appealed to God against the unjust sentence of God's Vicar, invoking the Divine protection upon the Republic of Florence. Raimondo, Capuan and

ecclesiastic told the tale with horror ; Neri listening, felt the Florentine in him a-tingle with pride. Nevertheless, with a sigh, he reassured the priest, cheered, consoled, encouraged. He had known that this would be his part, for Raimondo, scholarly in his way, truly devout and unworldly, was physically and mentally a timid man. Neri's first act in Avignon, by Catherine's command, was to be confession to him ! The thing appeared impossible. For the first time, the disciple deliberately disobeyed his spiritual mother.

He was all the more anxious to do her larger bidding promptly, to see Pope Gregory and fulfil his commission. The more arduous the situation, the more imperative the need ! Before now, the worst had proved the best to the brave. But to see Gregory proved no such easy matter. The exacting formalities of an earthly Court surrounded the chief Shepherd of Christ's flock ; they dwarfed him sadly in the eyes of one severe young pilgrim. Settled in lodgings with Fra Raimondo, the days passed by. In vain he presented credentials, pressed his suit. Politeness met him at every turn. His request for an audience was not once explicitly denied, yet, baffled perpetually, his suspicions rose that if dignitaries could prevent, no further messenger from Catherine Benincasa should reach the ears of the Pope.

Raimondo had been received on his first arrival, and, as he reported, by no means ungraciously, though he had not furthered his errand. He had much to say of the glories of the Papal palace and the condescending kindness of the Holy Father. Gregory had listened to him with courtesy, made no response, and turned the conversation to Italian art— "Concerning which," Raimondo plaintively remarked, "he might have known from looking at me that I know very little." Having little French, the priest had been obliged to conduct the conversation in Latin. He had seen two Bishops present at the interview snicker at some imperfection in his speech, and had been wounded thereby ; was full, indeed, of the mockery and arrogance—veiled, he confessed, under fairly good manners, and accompanied by choice scholarship — shown by those surrounding the Pope. Catherine could never get the better of these men, he con-

fided to Neri, no, not though she had confuted Master John III. of Lecceto!

Waiting perforce—impatient, yet it may be not at heart regretting his delay—Neri studied his Avignon under the guidance of Louis de Frontaigne, and, truth to tell, enjoyed himself on the surface of life hugely. The city opened free welcome to the young Tuscan, here as elsewhere an attractive figure, and he in return swiftly responded to its fascination and brilliance. The prevalent atmosphere of the Papal Court was French—twenty-one out of twenty-four resident Cardinals were, like Gregory himself, of that nationality, and their suites were naturally composed for the most part of their fellow-countrymen. It was not surprising if the clever persiflage current at Avignon bewildered simple Fra Raimondo, accustomed as he had been to the childlike outspoken emotions of the Italians of the South. Neri, who had his full share of Tuscan subtlety, found this French subtlety less incomprehensible, if not less exasperating. It was translucent, like a jelly-fish, and like a jelly-fish, it stung when touched. On the whole he thought the sting not unpleasing. The light mocking tone that generally obtained in the place suited the ironic strain that blended with his own sweetness of temperament.

Two classes dominated Avignon society—clerics and women. The presence of the latter as equals in the game with men was an unexpected feature of the city. Catherine had been so far the only woman known to Neri who cared for public affairs; she had perhaps owed her supreme position in his judgment a little to this fact. But here women were everywhere—delicate, vivacious daughters of France, less passionate, though not less sensuous than the women of Italy—sisters, nieces, mothers, what you will, the proprieties being always observed—a-flutter in the palaces of dignitaries great and small, quietly directing matters of State at their pleasure. Neri might easily have been a favourite with these ladies. Elys de Turenne, wife of the Pope's nephew, a charming, piquant creature, paid all but open court to him, hinted her power to obtain the desired audience. But from these advances Messer Raniero held aloof. In the

square cathedral porch gleamed a fresco of St. George, painted not so many years before by his own countryman, Martini. The Saint was a languid, though graceful combatant; the dragon, ornamental arabesque of wings and tail. But the watching Sienese Princess, her golden hair flower-enwoven, her gown the colour of little leaves newborn, her attitude a terrified grace, smiled from the plaster with half-shut eyes, ah! too familiar and too dear! Neri never passed the fresco without a leaping of the heart to the thought of Ilaria; more than the memory of Catherine, it held him indifferent to the ladies of France. But the lighter aspects of Avignon were in any case not those chiefly to arrest his attention. To these aspects, as to the grosser pleasures which the place offered in abundance, de Frontaigne, his guide in these intricate ways, was as obtuse as himself, intellectual fastidiousness regulating the conduct of the young scholar as strictly as conscience could desire.

And the most distinctive delights of Avignon were assuredly those presented to the intellect. Here the quest of every type of mind could be satisfied, for here even before the Papal occupation much in the intellectual life of Europe had from geographical reasons been focussed. No wonder that the theological learning filled Fra Raimondo with despair. The scholastic method, a little over-ripe, was met in full flaunting glory at Avignon, where the voice of the Angelical doctor himself had once sounded through the Dominican convent. The logic of these keen clerics, pouncing and piercing without mercy, left the poor father dazed; these were the cleverest men in Europe, and cleverness to their mind was the sole guarantee of truth. But thinkers of other types were not lacking—audacious voyagers in strange seas of thought, aiming in diverse ways at undiscovered lands. For the town, paradoxically enough, was a hotbed of heresy, and a centre of anti-Christian thought. Here the two great currents of medieval free-thought, a mystic communism and a philosophical materialism, met, but did not blend; for descendants of the Spanish Jews jostled in the streets against poor men of Lyons or against people of wilder aspect, within whose mind floated mysterious Oriental

wisdom, bequeathed from the dawn of time. The torch of Franciscan faith also still passed privately from hand to hand. Some of the ablest men Neri met were discussing at this juncture daring theories of direct Franciscan inspiration, mooted by Marsiglio of Padua, and by one John Wyclif, of Oxford. All these people were occupied with interests theological or social. Others—and these singularly delightful —were absorbed, like de Frontaigne, in quite different matters—for humanists of the dawning Renascence intermingled in this complex life at Avignon with representatives of all phases of medieval thought.

Neri came to understand only too well the point of view of those who scoffed at the idea of the removal of the Papal See to Rome. Seventy years had sufficed to root the Papacy firmly at Avignon. Numerous dignified foundations, secular and religious, traditions and habits firmly established, architecture at its noblest, fresco art at its most lovely, united to make the town a worthy and impressive centre of the life it enshrined. Nor could the patriot and the emissary of Catherine deny that, in contrast to turbulent Italy, the sense of security and freedom here offered were most grateful. He had been transported, as it were, into the world's future, and looked back at Siena as through a long vista of vanishing years. Intellect wideawake, imagination strained ever for the vault, conscience perhaps a little sleepy, the delicious spring days passed by. As his observation widened, the demon of disillusion that had beset his childhood unfolded gloomy wings over the far horizon of his soul; but as yet the weather overhead was clear. For the rest every one was happy at Avignon. The mere climate ensured that—the cloudless sky, the delightful air, the life free from asperity or effort, the constant joyous carolling of innumerable bells.

At times, as he eagerly shared this eager life, Louis' first statement recurred to him; that all things, save religion, were to be found in the city of the Pope. In a sense, he saw at once that the exception could not be granted. Sincere piety, as well as sound learning, harboured at Avignon—piety that regretted the corruptions of the place,—but mildly; that even granted the false position of a Pope

divorced from Rome, but with the air of one making concession ; that recognised in gentle pain the sins of Christendom, but shrank from protest lest it criticise the inscrutable ways of the Almighty. And despite this piety, despite the theological acumen, despite the vigour with which interest in religious questions flourished in the place, every now and then, in the dead of night, Neri, waking to a sense of dreadful loss, would suddenly and dispassionately ask himself whether, seeking the Court of the Vicar of the Most High God, he had inadvertently strayed into the precincts of the King of Hell : since it seemed hardly possible that any place but a City of the Lost should be as desert of God as Avignon.

* * * * *

It was to the tireless good offices of Louis de Frontaigne that he finally owed his introduction to Pope Gregory. On a starlit evening when the young men, leaving a brilliant company, had strolled together to the broad bridge of St. Bénézet, the Parisian told him that he would be received on the morrow, "And alone," he added, "which is of course a great advantage."

"I can but thank you," said Neri, "and thank you also for giving me the news here rather than yonder."

Louis nodded.

"I thought you would not care to spend the night crossing mental rapiers," he answered. "Better prepare yourself by a stroll in the wind and a night's sound sleep; you will need all your wits for your plea to-morrow."

The two knew each other well enough by this time or common silence. Neri left his friend gazing at the Rhone, which slowly flowed below, catching and breaking in its turbid waters the light of myriad stars. He wandered further on the bridge till he reached a small building above the fourth arch, the tiny Chapel of St. Nicholas, where lay the body of St. Bénézet, shepherd saint. And as he paused by the small chapel, the plan shaped itself of another preparation from that suggested by his friend, before he should meet the Chief Shepherd of Christendom.

He returned to find Louis staring moodily down at a

black shadow of mighty bulk that wavered in the waters, the reflection of the Papal palace.

"So the shadow of the fortress of the Carnal Church cuts off free starlight from the flowing river of life, as our Waldensian friends would say," he remarked.

"Louis," pleaded Neri, "do not speak so to me!—not to-night of all nights!"

It was the first time that he had ever betrayed trouble or weakness before the scepticism of his friend.

"I will not," replied the other kindly, but with a touch of unusual sadness. "Rather," he continued, "I will tell you a story that will help you to present your cause with effect, if you know how to use it rightly. Now, why look hesitant?"

"Understand," returned Neri, "that I purpose to use the most direct means with the Holy Father; to present the messages and letters of Catherine; to allow the cause to speak for itself. The woes of Italy are my sole argument."

"As you like," answered Louis calmly. "I doubt if your direct means achieve much, however. You have not, let me suggest to you, that spiritual fire of absolute conviction which might conceivably kindle a dry soul or fix a wavering one. Your mind is too many-faceted for that, my friend. Now you are patriot now Catholic, now scholar now believer, now ascetic and mystic, now satirist and man of the world. I have noticed that only the fanatic can stir men to action, and fanaticism is one trait I have not observed in you, despite the school to which you belong."

Neri stirred impatient.

"Discuss me not!" he cried. "'Tis not of the contradictions in my poor nature that I must this night be thinking. Oh, you see truly: all my life I have tried to fight on opposite sides at the same moment."

He paused, knitting his brows.

"You might, if you chose, prove an excellent diplomatist, Raniero," rejoined Louis, "for you have subtlety and charm, and an aptitude for paradox. Yes, wince if you like," and both young men laughed, Neri a trifle ruefully. "But listen to my tale. During the short period when the Papal

See was at Rome under Urban V., the Sacred College was as restive and dismal as it would be if forced into exile again to-day. Urban, yielding as you know to their discontent and his own, laid his plans to return. Now, there was at Rome that excitable lady, Bridget of Sweden, and, viewing the situation much as your Catherine does—I suggest no other comparison—she did her perfervid best to keep the Pope there. And to this end, whom should she choose for confidant but the present Pope, the then Cardinal Roger de Belfort? I suppose she turned to him because he was of gentler, not to say more credulous, nature than most of the other high prelates around Urban; at all events, it was to him that she solemnly confided the fact that she had received a revelation from God that, should Urban return to Avignon, he would swiftly and surely die. She adjured the Cardinal de Belfort to lose no time in imparting to the Pope this her message."

"And Urban disregarded so solemn a warning!" exclaimed Neri. "And the prophecy was fulfilled. Awful are Thy ways, O Almighty!"

Louis shook his head.

"He did not disregard, for he never received it. Bridget had ill-chosen her emissary. I have noticed, by the way, that direct communications from the Heavenly Powers seldom give their recipients the faculty to read character. Roger de Belfort was a man in delicate health, consumed even more than the other Cardinals with home-sickness for the fair plains of France. He suppressed the message, and the Court returned to Provence. After the death of Urban, which followed almost at once, he was for weeks plunged in the profoundest gloom; and when a candidate for the Papal office—now, though I may not give you my authority for this, you may absolutely trust the fact—the Cardinal de Belfort vowed solemnly and secretly before God that were he appointed he would restore the See to Rome."

"Is it possible," cried Neri, "that a man should know such an experience—make such a vow—and refuse to fulfil it? Six years have passed since that day, and still he is here!"

"Gregory does not refuse, he dallies," returned the other. "Again and again he announces his intention to return, and lingers still. I have put a weapon in your hands that may end his dallying. Use it how you will, and notice that you need say no untrue word. Gregory may be unable to conceive that knowledge of this his secret, could have reached you otherwise than direct from God, but you need make no such assertion. Simply keep silence concerning the source of your information. An allusion to the vow will, if I mistake not, effect more than dirges eloquent as Petrarch's over the sorrows of Italy. Do we return together?"

Neri excused himself, and when his friend was gone sought the Oratory of St. Bénézet, purposing there to observe vigil. Through the long hours of the night he watched and prayed, and when the mighty bulk of the fortress-palace riveted his gaze found comfort in the bridge. Often he had seen the Bridge Builders—that confraternity to which, it may be, St. Bénézet belonged—never without emotion at the sight of their white dress, the two arches of a bridge, in red, below the cross emblazoned on their breast. Were not their labours symbols of the true work of the Church? Not in that frowning palace was the true image, but in the bridge built to unite the sundered, and consecrated by a little home of lowly prayer. He, too, at least in desire, was of this confraternity. Could he on the morrow be Catholic and patriot at once? Could he in the larger life still play the reconciler? A sudden noise arose in the streets of the sleeping city. He heard in it the rumour of the confused battle between ideas, faiths, desires which had filled his ears of late. Might it be that the morning should bring peace? In the light of the eternal day each combatant, seeing the face of his foe, might pause aghast, beholding therein his own; and Neri, fighting as he had told his friend, on both sides at once, was perhaps not so foolish after all. His night was troubled; nevertheless, as often happens, the cool tranquillity of the scene he left sustained his spirit as he sought, in the morning, the Papal Palace.

CHAPTER VI

A SOMEWHAT PITIABLE GENTLEMAN

THE great mass of building through whose intricate ways Neri was conducted the next morning was the proud result of seventy years' Papal occupation at Avignon. Compared to its up-piled fortifications, the little ancient Cathedral of Notre Dame des Doms looked significantly small. Without, the Papal Palace fronted the world with military defiance—a stern construction, expressing the asceticism defensive of the soldier, not the asceticism contemplative of the saint. Within, it welcomed those privileged to enter by superb wealth of ornamentation. Neri passed up a stairway of white marble, through the naves of the great Hall of the Consistory, where Queen Giovanna of Naples had brilliantly defended herself thirty years ago from the charge of murdering her husband. He lingered, stirred with patriotic pride, to note the extreme richness and delicacy of the frescoes in which Simone Martini and other Sienese masters had depicted all the peoples of the world ranged in order under the judgment-seat of Christ. Very different work this from what adorned the Convent of the Wood of the Lake—work, indeed, suggestive of a range and height of power such as art had hardly elsewhere realized. Its mystic fervour, conveyed through suave flow of line and lovely play of colour, revived the religious sentiment of home. In the upper chapel of the Pope in the Tower of St. John deeper feeling gave him pause, for the scene of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, painted by Matteo di Viterbo, reminded him irresistibly of another scene—the execution, two years before, of a young Perugian, Niccolo di Tuldo, whom Catherine

had accompanied to the scaffold. He dropped on his knees for a moment before the altar, gazing on the pictured face of a kneeling woman whose eyes were filled with pure compassion; nor did he after this allow himself to be diverted by the interest of his surroundings, but kept his gaze fixed sternly on the floor as he moved towards the presence of the Head of Christendom. Before his inward sight shone the image of the Church Catholic which he had brought with him from vigil, the bridge, secure above the rush of many waters, blessed by the chapel of the shepherd saint.

Pope Gregory gave audience in a high apartment overlooking this very bridge. He sat by the window, at a table on which lay several rolls of parchment, examining a tray covered with choice examples of goldsmiths' work. From among these he chose a crucifix, finely wrought, but very small, and fingered it as he talked, holding it for clearer inspection in the sunlight.

That sunlight, streaming through the window-arch, revealed the man with much distinctness. He was slight and delicate in build. Disease of body was plainly betrayed by the shadowy cheeks, much lined for his forty odd years. Disease of soul showed none the less plainly, in a troubled lift to the eyebrows, that imparted to the face a look of search, expecting, and perhaps desiring, no answer. The countenance, withal, was unmistakably of the legal cast—self-contained, alert, studious. The smile was captivating, but rare. On the whole, Neri's first impression from the Father of Christendom was of the unconscious dignity of high place, blended with something appealing, complex, very gentle.

The Pope bore himself as one fearing excitement, and consequently reluctant to yield entire attention. Neri was received with courteous quiet; the whole interview, conducted in French, passed almost in undertones, since the young Sienese echoed by instinct the low voice of the Pope. And first Gregory spoke of the goldsmiths' work before him, handing specimens to admire,—all, as he informed Neri, evidently with a kindly wish to please, the work of Sienese artists, from the collection of his predecessor, the art-loving

John XXII. And did the Sienese continue the tradition of this marvellous handicraft, could Messer Raniero inform him?

Neri, charmed, a little dazed, yet perceived his opportunity. He spoke of the pleasure he had experienced in finding everywhere at Avignon the artists of Italy to the fore, and ventured to draw a somewhat audacious inference. Could a land that thirty years ago had obviously held the lead in the fine arts, in truth, he asked His Holiness, be a barbarous country, unfit for Papal residence?

Gregory shivered a little.

"I have been at Rome," he answered simply, but with a thrill in his faint voice. "The city made on me an impression of unendurable and immemorial sadness."

Ah, this sadness, Neri too had felt it! Personal pleasure in Gregory's society was stealing over him. How delightful, with this man of highest culture, to analyze such a feeling, trace it to its source! He recalled himself strictly to the matter in hand, and drew the letter of Catherine from his bosom. He was here not to appreciate a temperament, but to deliver a message.

The Pope received the missive thoughtfully.

"And what relation," he asked, "do you bear to this Dominican tertiary?"

"She does me the honour to employ me as secretary," replied Neri.

"Ah," Gregory mused, "holy illiteracy, it seems, is forced to avail itself of the services of the lettered, and holy poverty chooses a man of the world to do its bidding!"

The words seemed cynical, but there was more disappointment than irony in the tone.

No response occurred to Neri.

"Will you not read the letter?" he asked.

Not while I can have the pleasure of your company, monsieur," Gregory returned, his quick smile smoothing the fretful lines from his face. "But I will surely read it. I have read all the letters Sister Catherine has sent me—all that have reached my hands."

The last words were spoken with a shade of suspicion.

"I have messages which she would not entrust to writing for your private ear," Neri pursued, baffled and attracted at once by this very lovable gentleman in whom it was hard to recognise the bearer of that tremendous title, "Christ on earth." And, as Gregory signified attention, he proceeded to present information with which Catherine had charged him, facts concerning the political situation in Italy. Given by her, they had glowed with the radiance of the holy cause they were meant to aid; repeating them, Neri felt with some discomfort their uninspired value, as weapons in the hands of the Papal party.

Gregory listened in silence wearily, the lawyer in his expression uppermost. Toward the Pope, the young Sienese had felt, rather to his own dismay, a sentiment of pity. In the man, he now discovered the judicial mind, and the discreet intelligence of the trained statesman.

"You mentioned Bologna," said Gregory after a brief pause, following the delivery of Catherine's commission. "Did you take that route from Siena?"

Neri assented.

"In that case," continued the Pope, "you can perhaps explain a curious circumstance which must have occurred at about the time you were there. We are advised that the tide of revolt was stayed for a few hours as by a miracle, and, indeed, a miracle was reported. A young archangel of supernatural beauty descended, it was said, from the skies on a white horse, and bade the people return to their faith with an eloquence possible only to angelic lips. He vanished suddenly, leaving a penitent and humble folk; but he did his work but half way"—Gregory's lips curled sadly—"for in thirty-six hours or so the state of popular feeling, as it appears, changed again, not gradually, as after a fading impression, but suddenly, as from some new cause. The revolt still rages fiercely. Can you throw any light on these circumstances?"

Neri, not unobserved, had coloured at some phrases in the Pope's speech. Now, thus adjured, he gave an account of all that had happened at Bologna, to the point of his sending back the explanatory letter.

"And you undeceived them?" said the Pope scrutinizing the charming face, and deeming it, perhaps, not unworthy to pass for an archangel. "And you undeceived them?" he repeated after a moment's silence. "It was a miracle very helpful to our cause."

Neri experienced a sudden creeping chill. "It was a miracle that did not happen, your Holiness," he replied simply.

"Eh!"—Roger de Belfort frowned, abashed, defensive, legal. "We could stir up a pretty discussion among our masters of theology as to what a miracle is or is not. There lay a miracle in the minds of the Bolognese—none of your doing. Faith in it was working a swift end to the ruin of souls. You took upon you to destroy that faith. You have courage, monsieur! The spiritual consequences are in a sense upon your shoulders. That a Christian may ever create a false impression, my subtle theologians might hesitate to assert. To claim that he must invariably destroy such impressions when they exist were to throw on him a burden impossible in this extremely complex world. Imagine the results did the Church as a whole adopt such policy! Are you, moreover, sure that the impression was in this case wholly false? Do you not, then, recognise a possible supernatural element in your escape?"

The Pope's voice was lower and calmer than ever as he spoke—himself in shadow, watching the while the illumined features of Neri. And if a young archangel can know such disillusion as sets the lips in an extremely bitter curve, his countenance—so Gregory may have thought—might assuredly resemble that of Raniero de' Pagliaresi.

"You may indeed," said Neri slowly, with much suavity, "succeed in making me a man of the world between you at Avignon."

"Have you heard such analysis of the possibilities of conduct for the first time at Avignon?" Gregory inquired.

"Oh no," returned the other—and the flash of hostility between the two minds was now undisguised. "From my ninth year I have been quite aware that it was frequent among Churchmen. But it is true that since my coming to

Avignon"—he was looking straight at the Pope—"I have heard peculiarly striking instances of the readiness of high prelates and ministers of Christ to suppress the truth when it suited them so to do." There was meaning in his gaze.

At the words a change, visible even in the shadow, passed over the features of the Pope. He rose, turned abruptly to the window, and stood gazing out. Presently he opened his hand and dropped the little crucifix which he had been fingering during the talk upon the table behind him with a gesture almost of rejection. The palm of the hand, still stretched and open, bore sharp red marks—the points of the cross had evidently just been pressed into it with convulsive energy.

Neri, awed by the effect of his words, was in a tumult of question. The allusion which had sprung from him in impetuous anger was potent, as Louis de Frontaigne had foretold. Should he press it? Why not play in earnest the rôle of supernatural messenger which the Holy Father had sanctioned—reveal to Gregory the secret of his soul, and with this leverage proceed to put forth all force of eloquence and passion he possessed to force the man before him—mere fellow-mortal as he clearly enough perceived—to end his dallying and then and there adopt the righteous course?

He could do it. He felt within himself a histrionic power. All that was sardonic, all that was patriotic, much that was Catholic in his nature urged him on."

"Holy Catherine, aid your son in Christ!" Involuntarily the cry burst from his heart, and the wish to make use of the knowledge given by Louis de Frontaigne faded. It left to him a tender fellow-feeling for Gregory. When the Pope turned from the window at last, Neri was not surprised to see the face troubled. Here was no longer the ruler of men—modest enough, but thoroughly assured—who a short time before had received him; nay, but a brother-pilgrim, hesitant and sad. Tears had been in Gregory's eyes. A mask had fallen—the face spoke pure appeal.

By swift impulse, Neri lifted the crucifix where it had fallen, and, dropping on one knee, raised it reverently.

Gregory, however he may have interpreted the peculiar act, received the holy symbol, and lifted it to his lips.

"Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis," he murmured.

"She does! She will!" Neri, still in the attitude of the penitent, drew strength from the posture to speak his nobler mind. "Mary and all the saints in heaven, Catherine and all the blessed upon earth are praying for your Holiness. O send forth Thy light and Thy truth that they may lead him! May Thy Holy Spirit lead him forth into the land of righteousness!——"

"Holy Father," he continued, rising to his feet, "for you the land of righteousness is Italy, and the holy mount of God is the Capitoline Hill."

"It may be so," assented Gregory.

He watched Neri with an inscrutable look, in which expectation and desire seemed hinted. As the young man kept silence, he continued presently:

"I am advised that Catherine has been summoned to Florence by the insurgents. It may be that she can induce them to lay down arms."

"She has written us that Christ Himself has given her commission," Neri returned reverently. "He has placed a cross upon her shoulder, an olive in her hand, and has bidden her go forth as His messenger, to one and to the other party. Note, however, Holy Father, that her errand is not to the Florentines alone. If Florence has rebelled, was it not outraged? If it sin, is the Church unstained?"

"Bold words, my son," returned the Pope.

"Let me speak bolder!" exclaimed Neri. "The Church that should break every yoke, is the arch-tyrant of Italy, and her watchword waves upon the banner of her foes. I declare to your Holiness that at the sight of that great word, *Libertas*, gleaming upon the Tuscan banner, my heart leaps within me, and little lacks but I enroll me beneath its folds."

An incredible yet unmistakable light of sympathy shone in Gregory's face.

"Thus spoke Donato Barbadori," mused he, "and with greater passion and eloquence."

"If I remain the loyal son of Holy Church," Neri went on, "it is because I dare trust that the end of these shames is at hand, and dare believe that, in spite of her sins, the life of God is within her. Still shall God turn us and so shall we be turned. Still may we see you, the Shepherd of Christendom, coming in the power of the Cross, to purify and restore. Listen, Holy Father, to the words of Catherine."

He lifted the parchment from the table, and read aloud.

"'Then comes the Infinite Goodness, and finds an attractive way, the most gentle and loving possible. For it sees that the heart of man is nowise drawn as by love, because it was made for love. Holiest sweet "babbo" mine, I see no other way for winning back your sheep, which have left the fold of Holy Church in rebellion. I pray you, then, on behalf of Christ crucified, and I will that you do me this grace, to overcome their malice with benignity. Yours we are, Father. I know that they all feel that they have done wrong; but although they have no excuse for their evil deeds, yet it seemed to them that they could not do otherwise, on account of the unjust and iniquitous things they endured from bad governors, whom you know yourself to be incarnate demons. I ask you then, Father, to show them mercy; restore peace to us miserable children, who have done wrong. I tell you, sweet Christ on earth, on behalf of Christ in heaven, that if you do thus, without any strife or tempest, they will all come grieving for the wrong they have done, and will put their heads in your bosom. Then you and we shall rejoice, because by love you have restored the wandering sheep to the fold of Holy Church.' Hearken," Neri cried, "to the words of the handmaid of the Lord! Show mercy; know that forgiveness is force at the height!"

Gregory bent serious brows upon his eagerness.

"At the present moment," he said abruptly, "the Cardinal Count Robert of Geneva is on his way to stamp out the rebellion, with ten thousand Breton free-lances at his back."

"Blood can but gender blood!" exclaimed Neri. "'What

need of military banners? Let the Cross of Christ suffice,' said Francesco Petrarca."

"That man of letters knew not life," rejoined Gregory, shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, recall Count Robert in a greater Name!" answered the other, eager still. "In the Name of Him who bade us turn the other cheek to the smiter!"

Gregory smiled sadly.

"Would you have me turn Poor Man of Lyons, my son?" he asked. "'Twere a new heresy for a Pope."

"Ay, verily, I would," replied Neri.

"Meekness, non-resistance, mercy," reflected Gregory gravely. "Is it by these that the dominion of the Church Catholic has extended itself over Europe?"

"Yes!" returned the other, drawing a deep breath; and, as the Pope looked at him, all but quizzically, he continued: "Do you ask for proof? I find it in the rage of men when she belies these virtues. Let a Visconti reach out insolent claws, to clutch and slay, men do but shrug, and admire while they fight him. Let the Legates of the Church do likewise, and the desperate anguish of an outraged trust blends with the outcry. Meekness and mercy are the soul of the Church; let them perish, and her body will rot itself out of being. Those who scoff say, indeed," he ended sadly, "that that process is begun!"

"What would you have me do?" sighed Gregory.

Neri drew a deep breath.

"Have I not said?" he answered. "Cast compromise aside; refuse reprisals. Assert no rights; amass no wealth; renounce the world. Abandon all claim to temporal dominion. Follow the Master's way. You will be called mad by all proud folk, both lay and cleric; and those pilgrims who seek the City not made with hands shall follow you whithersoever you go."

"And thus," rejoined the Pope, "shall we lead civilization with all its glories to a self-inflicted death."

"Yes!" Neri spoke very quietly. "To the Way of the Cross, wherein the Church of Christ shall follow her Master and her God."

The troubled lines in the Pope's forehead deepened ; but presently he folded his arms, and spoke with an assumption of hieratic authority.

"Surely. Go, my son. Lacerate thy body. Leap to the Cross with Lady Poverty. Give flesh and substance to thy brethren, even as the Master bade. The Church Militant encourages thee, the Church Triumphant waits. Show us new reaches of self-abnegation, of heroic sacrifice ! It may be that the day shall come when thou shalt be remembered on the Altars of Christendom !"

"It is not enough!" cried Neri. "Of what avail that martyrs give their bodies to be burned, and saints yield heart and flesh in divine lust of sacrifice, while the Church their mother, chief foe to what she professes, holds worldly pomp, craves worldly power, uses worldly methods to prevail ? 'For ever since the Sweet Bride of Christ has sought for temporal dominion, things have gone from bad to worse.' So speaks Catherine Benincasa. Nay, Father, the Church herself as a living body is to continue in the world the holy life of her Master. Not only her children, but she herself, must be crucified with her Lord."

"Go, preach that doctrine to the College of Cardinals," said Gregory, smiling, but not unkindly ; then turned to the table beside him as with sudden impulse, lifted one of the parchment rolls that lay there, and bent his brows over it. Neri watched surprised. "Note the titles of these rolls," said the Pope absently, searching still.

Neri, obedient, found all the manuscripts to deal with one order of questions—the claim of evangelical poverty, viewed by the authority of Christ and the Apostles.

"Even as you speak to me," said Gregory, looking up at last, but keeping his finger on a passage, "did the followers of Holy Francis speak, fifty years ago, to my predecessor, John. When he declined to hearken, having too strong a liking for the fine work of your Sienese goldsmiths and like pleasant things, they did proceed to indict him for heresy. But it was Michael of Cesena who languished in prison, and his followers who died at the stake. John died unsentenced in the Seat of Peter, an

uncomfortable seat, I assure you, though for some strange cause much sought after. These rolls form a separate section of the Papal Library; a little room next the Chapel is reserved for them. They all, as I understand them, deal fundamentally with one plain question, the right of the Christian to be a son of this earth at all. They are ingenious, and possess considerable academic interest. I had them out on account of their bearing on certain similar theories just now revived in England by one Master Weecliffe. These too, my son, will have their day and die, even as the controversy of the Franciscans with the Papal See is over. For wisdom is justified of her children. The effort to induce the Church of Christ literally to follow the words of Christ will forever prove futile."

"And for ever," Neri replied, "it shall be renewed. For its death-hour were the death-hour of Christendom."

"It is hardly my place to urge you to join the heretics," smiled Gregory; "yet history clearly suggests that there is no place for theories like yours among the orthodox." Then, as he realized the distress in Neri's face, he added, musing deeply, "Nay, I did but jest. Yet let me speak in earnest. Resist not—possess not—do you say? You would reject the very affirmations of existence. You cry to the imperious demands of Nature to create, to acquire, to govern, a mere perpetual No. Let those like-minded betake them to monasteries and to cells. The Church does not discourage such action on the part of individuals—applauds it, rather. But for herself, as a body politic which must subdue men for men's sake, she does reject it. In the passage I have just consulted is the argument finally presented against the spiritual Franciscans by Pope John. He claims that while Christ as man possessed, it is true, nothing, yet as Son of God He possessed all things: and it is in this capacity that He is represented by Pope and Church. Yea, John was right. The Church shall continue to rule below as her Master rules above."

"How rule, except she know her passion first?" murmured Neri. "How reign, unless she serve?" In his

mind was a dim vision, not to be rendered in words, of a society in which the law of this earth should be reversed, and the Christian paradox triumph; where pride, lust of dominion and self-assertion should be demons of negation, and sacrifice the very affirmation of love; where the meek should inherit the earth, and from the renunciation of personal desire should arise the undying alleluia of a perpetual Yea. But too faint and far was the gleaming image for words to chronicle.

One last effort, at least, he would make to touch the wavering spirit of Gregory.

"Your Holiness," said he, "we have been led afar, and have probed deep, to seek the heart of truth. Meantime, near issues wait. Italian, I plead for Italy in her pangs; Catholic, I call on the head of the Church to restore and to heal. Return and heal the miseries of that distracted land; come as the reconciler; unite the sundered as did St. Bénézet. Heir of Peter, restore the Holy See to Peter's seat."

Gregory, standing in the sunlight, looked small, sad, and very French.

"Much keeps me in Avignon," he spoke, sighing gently. "We lead here a busy life. I, like my predecessors, am occupied with many things—with constructions, repairs, receptions, festivals; with military projects against the infidel, and diplomatic dealings with the European Courts. For these matters, our location here is convenient and central. The members of my own family, the Sacred College, the wisest of secular statesmen, all advise me to remain."

"All," summed up Neri, "save the power of God and the voice of your own heart."

"Your audience is concluded, monsieur," was Gregory's quiet answer; but he did not speak in resentment, for as Neri took his farewell, the Pope added gently: "Go in peace; we will converse again on these matters."

Passing out into the clear-shining air, fragrant with odours of the later spring, Neri breathed deep and free.

"Come
Pesa il gran manto a chi da fango il guarda,
Che piume sembran tutti l' altre some !"

he murmured. He had sought a spiritual father : he had found a brother in sorrow. Thinking over the interview, a heavy sense of defeat weighed him down. He had said what he could ; yet Gregory appeared to recollection to have borne him throughout the talk as one waiting expectant for a power that did not come to uplift him and release. It had not been for Neri to bring that freedom ! De Frontaigne's words, "A somewhat pitiable gentleman," recurred to memory ; behind those massive walls he left a fettered man. In shocked surprise, he found compassion the chief feeling with which he came away from the presence of the Vicegerent of Christ.

CHAPTER VII

MONT VENTOUX

"She is coming, Neri! She is at hand! Our mamma will arrive on the eighteenth of June, with Stefano and Alessia and Cecca! I beg your pardon for intruding, gentlemen," and Fra Raimondo, who had entered with scant ceremony, beamed unabashed at the supper-company gathered in the rooms of de Frontaigne.

Simeon Calonymos, a superb gentleman in middle life, frowned a trifle; his sentence had been interrupted in the middle.

"Sit down with us, father," said Louis courteously; he was always especially polite to people who bored him. "You must pass away somewhere the time until your mamma arrive."

And Raimondo, albeit looking askance at the noble nose of Calonymos, settled himself beside Neri.

"As I was saying," resumed the Jew in his rich voice, "my grandfather's Hebrew translation of the Arabian text runs as follows: 'All things are corruptible save one, the Face of God.'"

"It is a glorious phrase; but how," said Neri, "about the soul of man?"

"Of the soul, so-called, my grandfather's manuscripts say little," rejoined the other. "The rational mind may, indeed, become purified till it is the mirror of the universe, but even in so becoming it must cease, in a sense, to exist. So held Averroes."

"But the soul," said Fra Raimondo naïvely, "is, as we all know, immortal."

Calonymos looked mild disdain.

"Matter is eternal and intelligent," he replied. "Humanity, if you will, is a permanent fact. It is the constant act of the Eternal Wisdom. But separate personalities are are but bubbles that form and vanish on that mighty sea."

"The angelic doctor has confuted that abominable heresy!" cried Raimondo. "He has shown that each human personality is a separate entity."

"A low view," replied the other calmly; "and the doctrine of immortality, which you thence deduce, is egotistic as it is crude. Man is to expect no recompense save such as he finds here below in his own perfection. The active intellect, the common thought of the race, alone endures; all that is individual perishes with the flesh."

"Not so! not so!" The new speaker was a man of faint, wide-set blue eyes. "The soul is the eternal pilgrim; its past, as its future, knows no goal. It inhabits myriad bodies. But I speak of an ancient mystery," and the half-chant of his voice died away.

"This," Neri's neighbour murmured to him, "is the heresy of the Catharists, allied at some points to the old doctrine of the Eternal Gospel. It occasionally reappears in these parts."

But Louis de Frontaigne was speaking smilingly.

"These views are very interesting; but, after all, are they of much importance to us? It always seems to me a curious delusion to consider immortality so closely. If I am living a hundred years hence, I shall still possess only the present moment; that moment is now mine. What think you, as a man of science, of these matters, Master Francesco?"

The person thus addressed was the physician of the Pope, Doctor Francesco Casini, a Sienese of scholarly mind, much respected at Avignon.

"I agree with you, Monsieur de Frontaigne," said he. "These abstruse discussions are losing their interest. You, Messer Simeon, give us Averroes at his best, far indeed from the crass materialism of the Paduan school, hated of my dear friend Petrarch. You," he turned to the mystic, "are of

those who dream through the ages one endless dream. The future, I believe, is to those who see. Let us learn to reason less, to observe more. New life awaits the world; it will be found, if I mistake not, in the natural sciences."

"Let us add poetry and the arts," said Louis. "These, with science, will suffice to enfranchise and illumine the spirit. And, apropos of poetry, I have a treat to end our evening. Master Francesco has brought me a letter from his friend, Messer Coluccio de' Salutati, at Florence—the theme, the value of the Muses. You will enjoy it, Fra Raimondo, for the author writes as a good Christian. We shall all savour the style"—and he glanced a little wickedly at the doctor, who was famous for barbarous Latin. "He argues for the study of poetry on the ground that the Holy Spirit is Himself the chief of poets, and that Holy Writ itself, in one mode of speech, is nothing but very poetry. He concludes that in nowise is the reading of gentle poets forbidden to faithful Christians."

"Read!" cried several voices. But even while listening to the choice Latin Neri's thoughts wandered. Coluccio de' Salutati, Secretary to the Florentine Republic, amusing himself at this crisis in the composition of graceful prose! Neri thought of Catherine on her way, sent by this same Republic, her soul one flaming aspiration toward unity and peace. What was her disciple doing in such company as this?

After the others had gone, he lingered a little. "In three days I shall hardly be my own master," he said to Louis; "and we have not yet had our promised climb up Mont Ventoux. Will you not come with me to-morrow?"

"Engagements prevent," sighed Louis. "I am sorry, for after the arrival of your mamma and your beloved Stefano I suppose you will have scant leisure for new friends."

So it came to pass that Neri climbed the mountain alone, save for a venerable guide who had been one of two to share the memorable ascent of Petrarch. He started before dawn from Malaucène, and light was just gladdening the world when he reached the upper valleys. Loitering in delight in

the high meadows, gay with fragrant blossom, he longed to pause to gather garlands—for whose brows but Ilaria's? How well these lilies would become her, that late narcissus, this orchis—rose and violet and white! Ah, but no—he shook his head sighing. That sweet lady of the spring-tide was Proserpina indeed to him, queen of the world of shades. He who sought the vision of truth unveiled might not linger in her flowery fields. In a mood joyously austere he left the meadows behind him, and began to clamber painfully over the naked rock.

It had been the voice of the Church, he reflected in a breathing-space when the way led easily, which had called him up, away from the allurements of a life devoted to æsthetic and imaginative joys. How faithfully he had followed, accepting often the witness of others to realities that were unknown by him! Was something now calling higher yet, opening an upward way which he could tread with more personal sincerity? How good to watch the horizon expanding as he climbed! His horizons had certainly widened at Avignon. He had always revolted at some points from the attitude of even the most devout among his fellow-churchmen. He shrank from the fierce asceticism so common among them, from their condemnation of the natural play of life and love, their narrow and partisan temper, the sharp distinction commonly drawn between the religious and the irreligious. In these late days he had become aware, to his distress, of dissatisfaction with that whole system of thought derived ultimately from Augustine, in which, since his induction into Catherine's Famiglia, his mind had been expected to move. This system—most splendid outcome of the juridical mind of the West, noblest inheritance from Rome—was by men in general, and naturally by Neri himself, accepted as synonymous with the Catholic faith. Intellect alone would never have transcended it; but during his stay at Avignon life itself had led him, half unconsciously, to crave a wider, freer revelation of infinite thought. Might he leave his past behind? Was it his strength now, no longer his weakness, that lured him away from obedience and faith? Definite convictions were certainly an encumbrance to a

climber. An easy tolerance, superior to dogma or party, a wise eclecticism, a supple elasticity of mind was perhaps the best equipment. He who would attempt rock-work must know free play of muscle ; and such work now beginning in earnest, the climber perforce let speculation drop.

The day was still young when he reached the summit and flung himself prostrate, being in great heat, breathlessness, and perfect peace of mind. Above, space soared. Glancing below a dizzy spirit seized him—either he was standing on his head or direction had ceased in this infinity, for he looked down on a firmament of cloud. And even as he looked it was vanishing dreamwise, revealing in widening rifts the world that gave it birth. A world, how flat for all its serrated mountain ranges, how insignificant for all its far horizons, compared with that immensity of upper blue !

Neri had come hither to think ; but now, uplifted high in this keen air and vast radiance, alone, the day before him, he found that he could not think at all. Had Petrarch been the last man before him to accomplish this exploit he wondered ? He had read the charming letter in which Messer Francesco recorded his experience, and recalled it now. Petrarch had first been roused to home-sickness for Italy as he saw the distant Alps, and had then turned piously to reflections on his own character. Opening the " Confessions of St. Augustine " —his pocket-companion—he had chanced upon the famous passage : " And men go about to consider the height of the mountains and the revolutions of the stars, but themselves they consider not." " Satisfied," he wrote in the letter, " that I had seen enough of the mountain, I turned my inward eye upon myself, and not a syllable fell from my lips till we had reached the bottom." Neri laughed, realizing how differently he was himself affected. Self-scrutiny had been possible among the lower valleys ; there was no room left for it now in this bewildering exaltation over the sky and earth. He could but breathe and see and hearken ; yet the rise and fall of the breath, the vision of the eyes, the response of the ear to the grateful silence seemed strangely like spiritual faculties. The consciousness of physical existence widened,

till it extended to the horizon and in the very extension was transfigured.

He tried to summon images of devotion. That blue, was it not the billowing folds of the Virgin's robe? The sun, in a daze of white radiance, the Host that nourished the world? The images but mocked the vast concave. Disciplined habit carried him into the prayers for the Third Hour; in the midst his supplications faded. Was not the universe his prayer? Sharp summits, rosy-white and far, were better cries of the soul than he could use.

Prone on the golden rock, sun-steeped, he lay and rested —rested for the first time in many months. And as he lay there, thoughts, or impressions rather, began to float softly through his spirit's heaven like the little clouds that, having withdrawn to the horizon, were now rising silently, wandering as it seemed at random, yet shepherded steadily by the wind toward the upper deeps of sky. Impressions of a harmony with essential Being, vaster, purer than anything he had ever known. What was this invading ecstasy? Was it, perhaps, that larger fellowship for which he had always sighed in vain? If so, it was reached, not by effort, but by surrender; not by docile obedience to religious guides, but by abandoning the whole weary weight of tradition and dogma, and opening the individual soul to the solemn, solitary consciousness of undivided life. As now, as now! All was pure radiance around, within. He beat back and down the rising shadow-forms of theory, speculation. If thought would but cease, then were life attained!

Faint, clear, a fairy melody, recalling things long left below, the bells of Avignon throbbed through the silent air. He rose and faced the south. Below him, the swift waters of the Rhone were smitten to tawny light; there lay the city, illumined with miniature fineness on that fair sheet of vellum, the outspread plain. The spell was lost. His spirit dropped from the azure light into the golden. Son of the earth once more, he was once more the slave of thought.

Yes, there was Avignon, teeming with noisy theologies, philosophies, arts, and sins! And it was in Avignon that he must live, not on a mountain-top.

Yet why? He granted that soon he should be flinging his body down upon the plain. His spirit could abide here still in the vast pure unconfined.

One could plant a cross on the summit, too; but, to his dismay, Neri found that he had no wish to do that. The cross was artificial, like the rest down there. Was not that holy tree erected for ever just beyond the city gate, where crowds passed by, and spat, or pitied, or worshipped? Centre of art, centre of daily life, the crucifix, there below, encountered one on every hand; it had irked him sorely of late. Far above that world of compromise, conflict, delusion, lifted into this high purity and peace, there was no need of crosses any more. His great moments of religious passion in the dusk of the churches dwindled before this splendour of high noon. The mountain-top of his soul should know no symbol of a finite faith, piercing the soaring infinity.

A finite faith?

Avignon! In yonder tiny mass of towers and walls lingered the irresolute, pious, subtle person, known to the ingenuous faithful as "Christ on earth." Beyond those points of light, the Alps, Robert of Geneva, the handsome, scholarly, cruel Cardinal marched lightly on his devastating way. There lay Bologna, Florence there, scenes where the arrogant greed of the representatives of Christ flouted their Master's image. And here, close at hand, drew nearer a frail pilgrim full of mystic certainty that at her word the Pope himself would turn Christian. Poor Catherine! ignorant dreamer, sustained by an immemorial delusion—the defeat of the Church of Christ.

Yes, its defeat. Neri realized that no other word could express his feeling. The thought, when first it writhed within him at Siena, had been a tempting snake, shudderingly crushed by his higher nature. It was a messenger of deliverance now, leading him into a larger air. A great experiment had failed — the attempt at a revelation of righteousness through a body of people, one as the ages passed, manifesting a life above nature through the strength of a great example, and the power of a present God. Nothing had been lacking to theory. The Church had possessed

explicit directions. The person of her Lord had ever been before her eyes. More than this, she had held sustaining conviction that His very life was perpetually renewed by sacramental grace within the souls of her members. Yet who could look on history and deny her failure? Questions of dogma did not trouble Neri—rather the great question, the proof of dogma in the resultant life. Louis was right; by corroboration of the head of Christendom! The Church had through the ages denied by her policy the gospel that she preached! To consider her as a righteous society in the midst of an unrighteous world, outraged that plain honesty which was, after all, the most important possession of the race.

Well, cease struggling—accept the facts. What attitudes were possible?

One might cling to the old, as Catherine clung, with a superb paradoxical faith; might consecrate one's life, as he had done himself, to the effort to reform, seeking to make of the Holy Catholic Church, with Pope Gregory at its head, an expression of the will of Christ. Oh, magnificent, oh, ludicrous endeavour, forever renewed, forever thwarted! Witness a hundred memories; witness, of late years, those honest sons of Francis, the trace of whose last throes was so evident at Avignon. Thought dwelt on the two great religious Orders — the Franciscans, allowed to exist only by evading the impassioned faith of their founder; the Dominicans, cast under no outward ban, since they sought not to intrude the dangerous sphere of conduct, but contented them with matters of doctrine; yet, so far as their inner life was concerned, run, as an Order—so Catherine had written the Pope—"entirely wild." Alas for Francis! alas for Dominic! Alas for the reformer within the Church! Alas for Catherine!

Well one might grant that Catholicism was rotten, moribund, yet cling to the old method, organize religion anew. The Eight of War at Florence were planning, so he had lately heard, to establish a brand-new Church, probably under municipal control. Efforts of a nobler type were numerous. Had he not met Poor Men of Lyons? Great,

as he had learned at Avignon, was the history of heresies. The future might hold many such endeavours to bind men afresh in a common faith purer than of old. So mused the dreamer, vaguely recalling rumours of Wyclif and his English followers. For himself he saw scant hope in this direction. New associations, he foresaw, would be played upon by the old forces. Full of spiritual vigour at the outset, they, too, would be fossilized into convention by time, would yield to inevitable law, and drift into soothing their conscience over indifferent compromise with contemporary evil, by denouncing the sins to which their age was least inclined. No, not to any new Church could Neri transfer the loyalty with which he had clung to the Catholic faith. The old failure would be repeated, the old power would be lost.

Ah, then, let him wander in thought this one free hour! Since loyalty had proved delusion, why cling to outward form at all?

Why not let organized Christianity alone to proceed on its hopeless way? Let him be no longer agonized by its sins, if no longer fed by its sacraments! So de Frontaigne; so most of the keen minds he had been meeting, frankly indifferent to each aspect of the Church save that of a political institution. Why not? Better than dogma or sacrament was the progress of the untrammelled spirit apart from organized institutions. He could face the thought without distress, with exhilaration even. For the strangest part of this new experience to Neri was that to confess the failure of the Church involved no longer any moral despair. Her relations to the world, the immemorial struggle between good and evil within her bosom that had long possessed his breathless interest, seemed to dwindle in importance. The historic Church no longer seemed the chief hope of the human race. More and more the intellectual, nay, the spiritual life of man was, he dimly felt, destined to develop without her fold. A deep confidence in the progress of the race through the free and unrelated movement of individual minds was assuredly more grounded in fact and the law of our being than this attempt to regulate life and conviction from a centralized external power.

For why had the Church failed? And now he mused

long and deeply, clasping his head in his hands, while the sunshine grew intenser. Surely, through its effort at inclusiveness. Its victory had been its doom, its conquest of the world its sure defeat. Inevitably, so must always issue —Neri saw this with sudden, startling clearness—any attempt to translate a Divine idea into the common life while men were men. No purity except in isolation! He rose, opening his arms to the untainted wind—it penetrated, possessed. Let each press up regardless of his fellows, his only beacon the high-summoning sun. For a moment, with something like a renewal of his morning ecstasy, came a dizzying hope. Confusion of mind yielded to simplicity. The contact with reality, longed for from earliest childhood, had it come at last?

And in its very birth in consciousness the mood altered—confusion returned. Could he enjoy his lonely mountain-top while humanity below sought and strove? In vain he told himself that the mass of men were never meant to climb, were better off upon the plain; in vain, by defiance, by argument, sought to regain the fleeting exaltation. Here was but the old temptation to a hermitage of a new type. Though the cravings of temperament had always driven Neri to solitude, the deeper cravings of character had as constantly led him back to the quest for unity. Well, in the morning had he not realized unity; barriers broken, melted, separateness vanished, his atom spirit one with the soul of the natural world? Yes, but union with Nature was not enough. He thought of Catherine, true Catholic, identifying herself passionately with her sinful brethren. He, too, must, by the law of his nature, be restive till others shared with him these aerial heights of vision and of joy. But when he should take his patient place with the slow-ascending throng would not the old story repeat itself, the old turmoil, conflict, failure; and in the midst of it all the Cross, eternal contradiction, eternal salvation?

Neri descended as the shadows lengthened, weary and dazed; for spirit had travelled farther than flesh that day, even into the world's future. What has of necessity been recorded as analysed thought had been felt rather as successive

attitudes, through which with bewildering swiftness his mind had been hurled. In a few brief hours had been compressed experiences and ideas long to await their formulæ. Now the power of the seer had faded, languor and sorrow took its place. He looked forward with a mixture of personal desire and intellectual dread to the morrow when he should meet Catherine. The glory of the outer day had departed ; a grey thick atmosphere veiled without concealing the landscape. Small use to remain on the heights if the air were murky ! Crossing the mountain meadow where in the dawn he had played with the thought of Ilaria, Neri shivered. Even the blossoms had lost their brilliancy of colour with the atmospheric change. Only rain would purify the air. Could high consciousness of unity with universal life, could the love of truth, any more than the love of beauty, nerve man or woman for the agelong struggle against sin ?

CHAPTER VIII

A PASSAGE OF HISTORY

NERI had intended to be on watch for the pilgrim band from the first possible moment of their arrival; but it befell that, being delayed by the mists on Mont Ventoux, he was late in reaching the city. He found that Fra Raimondo had been seeking him in great excitement; those expected had arrived. Neri hastened to the house of John de Reggio, which had been through his care assigned to Catherine's use, and was welcomed by Stefano Maconi. Catherine had been, it seemed, closeted since dawn with Fra Raimondo and Master John III.; nor did Stefano suggest admitting Neri to her presence. The latter, a little hurt, yet realized that his failure to greet her had naturally put him in the background. Stefano was eagerly loving; but Neri, irrationally enough, resented a certain unconscious assumption, as if his friend were the natural guardian of Catherine's person. There was much, however, both to hear and tell—chiefly, as it proved, to hear. For Stefano, unaware that the other had been in the larger life of the two, was full of news concerning affairs in Siena and Florence. The magistrates of the latter city had ridden forth to meet Catherine, had treated her with highest respect, had urged her to plead their cause in person before the Pope. She had hesitated, said Stefano, but had finally consented on condition that the Florentines were sincerely ready to submit to the Holy See. Had the Eight really been willing to express such sentiments? Neri inquired in surprise, and Stefano reluctantly confessed that the negotiations had been, not with the War-govern-

ment, but with another committee of magistrates, including personal friends. Yet, after all, these were the responsible persons, he exclaimed, annoyed at a little shake of Neri's head. Catherine was here as official representative of Florence! She would meet "Christ on earth" face to face. Already, Stefano evidently felt, the cause of peace was practically won. His glowing enthusiasm made the two-month's resident of Avignon feel worldly-wise.

Delightful new members had been added in Florence to the Famiglia—Ristoro Canigiani, the lawyer, and his young brother, Barduccio; Don John of the Cells of Vallombrosa, once a fearsome sinner, now a mighty man of prayer; the noble Bartolo Usimbardi, and his wife Monna Orsa, who reminded Stefano of his own mother.

And how was Monna Giovanna? asked Neri.

Stefano's face clouded.

"She was reluctant to allow me to leave her," he sighed. "But what could I do? Catherine has grown to depend on me in every way."

Heedless of Neri's silence, he continued, laughing: "So Bernabo Rinaldini sought to play you an ill turn at Bologna! He gave you a fine chance to practise forgiveness!"

"I fear I have hardly remembered him enough to forgive him," confessed Neri. "But tell me, Stefano——" He paused.

"I suspect"—Stefano's tone was troubled—"that all is not well with Madonna Ilaria. She is proud and gay in bearing, but there is pain beneath. They say that her husband is fiercely jealous. I met her at a spring festival. She spoke of you—started to send you a message—then refused to go on."

Neri sighed.

"Have you seen Gualtiero?" he asked.

"Yes, as you asked of me; but it was of no avail. He stood gazing on a window—a strange turn to his neck, his face a mask of clay. A storm was raging; the cold rain beat in unnoted on his cheek. The demon of melancholy, say the kind brothers, has your poor cousin in his grip. I told him of the tender, forgiving heart of our spiritual mother—

there was a spasm of the face. At your name, too, the expression changed."

And as the two young men sat looking at each other sadly, Fra Raimondo entered the room.

"As you were not here," said he with unusual coolness, "I have fully explained the situation at Avignon to my daughter and mother. She will receive you when she sees fit."

"She will receive him now!" exclaimed Stefano, and entered the inner apartment without ceremony.

Neri stood amazed. Catherine, it appeared, was to be approached as elaborately as the Pope!

Such ideas faded as soon as he stood before her; yet there remained an impression of something august and remote in the personality he had long known so well. Coming to Catherine from the clever people he had enjoyed of late, including Pope Gregory, he was struck by a quality setting her apart and above. He had winced at times to confess himself the spiritual son of an ignorant visionary. The type was familiar at Avignon, and was viewed in the society where he found his natural level, much as "Salvationists" are viewed on the same level to-day. He now perceived that association with Catherine was, from any point of view, cause for pride. She was an eagle amid chattering jays; one felt that her strong flight might carry her at any moment into some upper region.

Her spirit was poised for such upward flight this very morning. Neri had feared lest her direct gaze pierce at once the new secrets of his mind. He was inconsistently chagrined to find his apprehension needless. After the first greeting, she asked no personal question.

But despite Fra Raimondo's cavil, she listened intently to all he had to tell her, and he had amassed more information than the simple Churchman concerning the state of parties and the mind of the Pope. He presented all he knew, including the story of Gregory's past dealings with Bridget of Sweden and of his secret vow; over this she bent a thoughtful forehead. She was preoccupied, Neri saw, with larger issues than the reconciliation of the Pope with

Florence, ardently though she proposed to labour for this end. The purification as well as the pacification of Christendom, such was the programme this amazing woman had set herself to accomplish. Had she not prayed for this during many years? From that hidden world of "holy desire" she had passed with no shock at the transition into the world of outward action, uplifted, not excited, by her new situation. What would be the effect of this high serenity, this unclogged energy of faith, on the sensitively-tempered Pope, on the complex intellectual turmoil of Avignon?

Catherine was to be received, she informed Neri, on the following day. He was pleased at the distinction in treatment, which she accepted as a matter of course. Speaking no Latin, she would need an interpreter, and Neri much desired so to serve. But Fra Raimondo had already been appointed, and it was from the excellent priest that the disciples heard, the next evening, an account of the momentous interview. Neri pictured the scene to himself—the small, aristocratic Pope, vested with the full dignity of his office; the woman, invested with a different dignity, before which that of high office-dom failed. Her presence, so he fancied, must have diffused strange warmth and light in those chilly Papal apartments. And her passionate pleading for generous policy toward the Florentines had been effective, for Raimondo had an astonishing fact to report: Gregory had offered to leave the terms of peace wholly to her discretion. Catherine herself, entering, confirmed the tidings.

"In order to show you that I sincerely desire peace"—such had been the words of the Holy Father—"I commit the entire negotiations to your hands. Only be careful of the honour of the Church."

In a day the news was the talk of Avignon. Catherine bore herself with solemn gladness; the delight of the disciples was undisguised. Only Neri found it impossible to suppress an ungrateful scepticism. The arrival of Catherine, though it had quickened his recognition of her personal greatness, had by no means obscured his recent convictions

concerning the hopelessness of Church reform. Was not this woman, so the troubling suspicion ran, used simply as a tool by the subtle powers of this world? His old friends, dimly aware of a change that had passed over him, tried in vain to break through his reserve.

The days as they advanced seemed to justify suspicions. It was all very well for Gregory to entrust the terms of peace to Catherine; her power had been simply that of a harbinger. She could conclude nothing till the arrival of the ambassadors from the Eight of War, who, so it had been promised at Florence, were promptly to follow her. Time passed; they made no sign. At the rumour of fresh taxes levied in Tuscany upon the clergy, Catherine wrote, by Stefano, who showed Neri the letter, a spirited remonstrance to the Eight:

"Nothing but shame and confusion could result if I told the Holy Father one thing and you did another. I have talked to him. He heard me graciously, showing that he had a warm love of peace. At the end of our talk, he said that if your case were as I presented it, he was ready to receive you as sons, and to do what seemed best to me. I say no more here. It seems to me that absolutely no other answer ought to be given the Holy Father till your ambassadors arrive. I marvel that they are not here yet. When they shall have come, I shall talk to them, and then to the Holy Father, and as I find things disposed I shall write you. But you, with your taxes and frivolities, are spoiling all that is sown."

The Florentines, so Neri surmised, had never had any serious intention of making peace; they had allowed Catherine to come with the sole object of gaining time. So thought Gregory also.

"Believe me, Catherine," Fra Raimondo reported him as saying, "the Florentines have deceived you as before now they have deceived me. You will see that they will send no ambassadors, or if they do the ambassadors will conclude nothing."

Would the Pope so readily have put the semblance of power into Catherine's hands, Neri once more asked himself, had he not known his Florence?

Yet this suspicion at least he repudiated. There was no mistake about Catherine's growing ascendancy over the weaker spirit. All Avignon was soon buzzing with amazement, amusement, disgust. Catherine was for the moment the most notable figure in the place, the most sought after, the best hated. Her purity, her dignity, her abrupt sincerities soared like a rocky snow-covered Alp beside the dainty ways and glancing wits of the gay ladies of the town. She had never before been in a Court, yet, despite long recluse years, the stamp of the cloister was not upon her. She was amazingly at her ease—with an ease born neither of ignorance nor of experience, but of pure insight. Instances of her candour amid the decorous bad reticences of the place were told from mouth to mouth. Something of mystery here, as at home, played about her withal. The Pope, in one of their frequent interviews, expressed surprise that she who had been in the city for a few days only should venture to rebuke as an intimate the vices of the Papal Court.

"Whereupon," said Raimondo, "suddenly changing her attitude of profound humility and reverence, our mother raised herself with an air of majesty and said: 'To the honour of Almighty God, I will dare to say that I was more conscious of the infection of the sins committed in the Court of Rome, when I dwelt in my native city, than those are who daily commit them.'"

On another occasion she serenely turned her back upon a demure young woman of pious aspect, who had come to visit her, and when remonstrated with later, remarked: "If you had been conscious of the stench of sin I breathed while that woman was speaking to us, I verily believe it would have turned you ill."

The person in question was the mistress of a certain Cardinal.

As for the theologians who had put Fra Raimondo to rout, she illumined the subtle problems they, in the hope of discrediting her power, were fond of presenting her, by light from a higher region of thought, in a way that reduced them to baffled silence, and reminded Neri of the method of Christ Himself. Often, however, she refused discussion with these

gentry ; more than once gently but firmly ignoring their presence. The divorce between theological learning and sound morals fashionable at Avignon certainly found no countenance from this Dominican tertiary. On more than one occasion she replied to spiritual inquiries with a certain touch of scorn : "First let us purify ourselves from our sins, and be delivered from the bondage of Satan, it will then be time for us to converse about God."

"We must descend into the well of humility if we wish to see the stars of the Divine mysteries," she said one day to the most learned prelate in the town.

Altogether a terrible person, but a force, as the most reluctant had to admit. Her mystic life continued unchanged, ecstasies and trances being as natural a feature of her days here as at Siena. Meantime her direct sagacity in matters political, her wide knowledge of men, her patience and balance of judgment could not be ignored. As usual, she was establishing relations with the best and most significant people in the place. As usual, a strong hostile party gathered against her. The smiling contempt with which men had dismissed all thought of clemency toward the Tuscan League —far more, a return of the Papal See to Rome—was yielding to agitation and anger.

Her prominence made her position the more mortifying as time languished, and the Florentine envoys still failed to appear. It was under these circumstances that she compelled from Neri and other discriminating minds the greatest admiration—an admiration, perhaps, all the greater because he was no longer identified with her position. No situation could have been more trying or afforded a keener test. Mocking sneers at the self-appointed messenger filled the air; not one thought of personal embarrassment or wounded pride darkened Catherine's horizon. Indifference preserved dignity intact where nine people out of ten would have forfeited respect by an attempt at self-assertion. Neri knew well how genuine was this indifference ; knew that the ceaseless ache in that great heart over the wrongs of Italy, the sins of the Church, precluded all personal sensitiveness. Yes, the reverence with which she had from the first inspired him

had depended on no provincial limitations of experience. Here, as at Siena, she dominated all others. Even de Frontaigne, who had, as he was quite aware, expected a broader contact with the world to emancipate his friend from subjection to the influence of a woman Religious, regarded her, to Neri's triumph, with deep respect.

Yet if Neri had hoped that his new friend would yield personally to Catherine's power, he was doomed to disappointment. There was no calling here of deep to deep. Louis maintained toward the holy woman the same attitude as toward some wondrous work of art. Was this becoming a little the attitude of Neri himself? Hardly. Yet the old simple relation between spiritual guide and loving disciple was not quite renewed. Though his sense was quickened of that high quality in Catherine—too exalted for charm, too humble for authority—which set her in a place apart, Neri had yet lost his power to accept, by either impulse or resolve, her point of view. The Petrarchan and Dantesque conception, so thoroughly shared by Catherine, of Rome as the mystic centre of civilization and religion had ceased to thrill him ; it was become no axiom, but a debatable proposition. In truth, although he knew not what was occurring, the old conception of a centralized religious authority was fading from his mind, as from others that had felt the breath of the future ; with it, for the time being, vanished enthusiasm for the cause of the visible Church, nor could he yet be aware that this cause might still be sacred to the new conception of natural and spiritual growth which was forming, far less that Christianity itself might prove to have included from the beginning all that seemed fatally hostile to its defenders of a day. Alas ! by some subterranean passage, the troops of Doubt had gained admission to the inner citadel of Neri's thought and there lay low, while the outer city within the ramparts remained to all appearance undisturbed.

He could not share these perplexities with Catherine. In these crucial days of her life, she trod her high path steadily, her eyes fixed on a far goal, not on the lower maze where feebler spirits roamed bewildered. From her chosen ones she needed whole-hearted support, both in practical matters, and in that great task of intercession which by word and letter

she continually urged. It had been both weakness and cruelty to intrude mental waverings on her at such a time. Beside, what use? Her high clarities, so Neri told himself, could not conceive the play of cross-lights. So it came to pass that Neri, silent as to his inner life, scrupulously loyal in word and deed to his party, did yet find him in an extremely bitter solitude. Though he said no word, the old dear sense of fellowship was blighted. The enthusiasm of Stefano, the motherly instincts of Alessia, all wounded him; and these old friends, feeling somewhat to be wrong, but preoccupied by new excitements, insensibly withdrew from him, to his quite irrational distress.

In outward matters, things went no better; the painful incertitude of his thought inhibited his active powers. These weeks were, doubtless, an unfortunate crisis in Neri's public career.

Restlessness was rife at Avignon. However hissed by the French faction, the question of the Pope's relation to Italy would not down. With the arrival of the Sienese Dominican, a suction became apparent, drawing toward the Italian vortex; it was watched, studied, that it might be opposed. Of all the enthusiasts who accompanied Catherine to Avignon, Neri was the only person of possible political significance; he had already been noted by more than one keen observer as a man who might make himself felt. But him, too, as the weeks went on, the French party ceased to dread; there was in him apparently no driving force; they dismissed him from their thoughts, proved weakling after all.

As for Catherine, always gentle with him, always loving, it is probable that she was at this time disappointed in her disciple. Unaware of those inner struggles which may co-exist with loyalty but hardly with efficiency, she was in all likelihood inclined to think that she had in the past overrated his powers. She had hoped much from his relations with Gregory; she found the Pope even more amenable to influence than she had expected, but though he spoke with affection of her young secretary, it was evident that in their intercourse the somewhat fragile Pontiff had proved himself the better man. With every advantage of personality and intellect, Neri, as Catherine was obliged

to perceive, was not making himself useful at Avignon. Now is the time—now is the time, to give honour to God, and our services to our neighbour! The words ring like a trumpet-call through her letters of this period. Herself a woman of action, Catherine craved the support of the unfaltering. More and more did she turn to one endowed with natural gifts inferior to those of Neri, but with all these gifts ready at command—to Stefano, the sunny, the hopeful, the vigorous, the obedient—Stefano, in whom the work of grace was increasingly evident, and who if enticed away at times by the natural pleasures of his age and rank, would return with genuine easily-understood penitence to the feet of his spiritual mother. So it chanced that Stefano wrote most of her letters now, and became her trusted confidant. So marked grew her reliance upon him that comment was not lacking. Catherine's Famiglia was made up of extremely human persons; there was some stirring of jealousy against this late-comer, promoted swiftly to so intimate a post. Stefano, in his joyous trustfulness, ignored such meannesses; nor did they dare show themselves in Catherine's great presence. None the less surely did the murmurs grow; and Neri was the recipient of more than one extremely distasteful expression of sympathy over his lost favour. Hurt feelings made him withdraw from Stefano and Catherine alike, with an aloofness which he mistook for dignity. Dull misery had him in grip. Not without his share of ambition, he was sensitively aware of lost opportunities slipping by. The consciousness of practical failure blended with that keen pain in the loss of his ancient faith which shadowed his days; and through all shot strange, degrading, hated pangs at the sight of Stefano with Catherine. Languor and fevered restlessness possessed him in turn. Resenting the solitude in which he was now for the most part left, he yet clung to it as his only solace. Again and again, why he knew not, Stefano's account or the condition of Gualtiero teazed his mind. In his dreams he would see the figure of his cousin, standing motionless, spiritless, his boyish beauty blasted, encompassed by the folding wings of a great demon of despair.

CHAPTER IX

THE PATHS DIVIDE

The ambassadors arrived at last. Neri first learned the fact from receiving on the street a curt salutation from one of them, Pazzino Strozzi, whom he had known at home. He presumed that the arrival had been signalled to Catherine without his knowledge, but the bitter thought was mistaken; she received no notification then or later.

It became his pleasant task to visit them, with the request that they receive their official predecessor. Facing their cold eyes, he found himself unable to feel that glowing exultation in ignominy which is a peculiarly Christian pleasure. The ambassadors were Tuscans—that is to say, their courtesy was insolence, their insolence courtesy; apparently they heard of the existence of this Dominican tertiary for the first time. It required another interview, a third, before Alessandro dell' Antella remarked with ostentatious patience that it would take less time to see this Benincasa once for all than to receive her continued importunities. Meantine, the Embassy was taking toward the Pope a tone of defiant accusation, and the hope of peace had dropped below the horizon line.

When the conference with Catherine finally took place, it amounted, as Gregory had foretold, to nothing. She was at no disadvantage, however, in dealing with these diplomatists. Flouted, thwarted, scorned, she bore herself with luminous majesty. No dead body could have been more insensible to personal humiliation; sharp insults glanced back from her obliviousness as from a polished shield. Waiving the

question of her official rights, she presented with her own inimitable union of ardour and sagacity, the reasons both practical and religious for an irenic bearing toward Gregory, the necessity of peace for the welfare of Italy.

"There can be no welfare without liberty," exclaimed Pazzino Strozzi angrily.

"Nor liberty," returned Catherine, "in a state where the citizens have not learned to govern the city of their souls."

And for once Neri's sympathies were not divided. Patriotism was more than contentiousness such as these men evinced; liberty distinct from self-assertion. Theirs was the freedom of a Farinata, glaring in impotent defiance from his tomb prison in the City of Dis, not of one "crowned and mitred o'er himself" at the summit of his purifying pilgrimage.

"What Italian who loves his city would treat with these hostile Frenchmen?" cried Michele Castellani, turning to Neri and Stefano with rhetorical fervour—the ambassadors had for some days been trying to win these high-born young Tuscans to their side. "Messer Stefano, Messer Raniero, we put the question to you: 'Would you allow the fate of Siena to be decided by the French Cardinals?'"

Then Catherine showed that true modesty does not hamper initiative, for, allowing her secretaries no time for reply, she said in a clear voice and with high dignity:

"There is no occasion to treat with Frenchmen, gentlemen. Though you violate the word of your city by refusing to recognise my credentials from Florence, you must, as you are perfectly well aware, accept in me the representative of the Holy See. It is mine to decide, in conference with you, the terms of peace for Tuscany."

No statesman ever bore his official rank with more haughty ease.

"We have, unfortunately, no authority to treat with any but the Holy Father himself," said dell' Antella, bowing formally.

"As for Florence," blustered Strozzi, the impetuous and indiscreet, "we have instructions to refuse all dealings with

you, whatever Soderini and his mad colleagues may have done."

Catherine raised herself to her full height, gazed silently in the face of the three men till their eyelids drooped, then signed to her retinue, and with free majestic carriage left the room.

"None can force peace on those who will no peace," she sighed when alone with her followers. "All that is left me is to entreat the Babbo to have mercy on them and their city."

"Mercy!" cried Fra Raimondo. "I would rather see that contumacious people punished to their full deserts, if only for their insolence to you."

Catherine shook her head with a gleam of laughter. "You are my very bad little father," said she. Then, a shadow crossing her face: "I deserve far more insults than they show me. Did I love more and pray more ardently, I should win even these men. My sins! My sins! But for the rest there would be neither wisdom nor true justice in inflicting on Tuscany what it deserves. One receives from a sick man what he can give, not what he ought to give if well."

It was in this strain that she continued, after the ambassadors had returned, to plead in vain with the exasperated Gregory. Sure evidence of the woman's power, her personal humiliation and defeat did not discredit her influence at Avignon. Neither did it disconcert her. Failure was to her virile spirit a reason not for limiting and lowering, but for expanding and exalting her aims. The return of the Pope to Rome—always in the background of her desires—became now her immediate purpose. And day by day her influence with the shrinking spirit grew stronger. Like many a half-hearted worldling, Gregory secretly pined for a power not of this world, to assert itself with unmistakable authority. More and more dramatic grew the conflict: in the midst a fragile man, keen-witted, hesitant-souled; on the one hand, a woman around whom rallied only the things that are not seen; on the other, in venerable array, the things that are seen—the Sacred College, the Papal family, the Sovereigns of Europe—all considerations of diplomacy, convenience and good sense. The methods of Catherine's adversaries increased

in virulence, in astuteness. She was ready for them at every turn. Did the Pope receive an anonymous threat of poison should he return to Rome? The next day an answer, sharp in logic, showed how sardonic the meek of the earth may be. Did the Cardinals refer to the example of Clement, who made no decision without the consent of the Sacred College? She was ready with a greater example. "Oh, Babbo mine! sweet Christ on earth," she wrote to him, "follow that sweet Gregory the Great! For all is as possible to you as to him. He was not of other flesh than you, and that God is now Who was then. We lack nothing but virtue, and hunger for the salvation of souls."

Neri watched, reverent and heart-sick: for he could not recover faith in Catherine's political programme.

His severe silence became ghastly to him. He broke it at last by sudden impulse—and to Stefano Maconi:

"If Gregory returns, what shall Italy profit?" he asked abruptly. Popes in Italy will be helpless, as in France, to aid the cause of right. Tyranny is no more grateful because it is at close range."

"But the Holy Father is not a tyrant. He is our chief shepherd," Stefano objected, wondering.

Neri waived the point. "Look forward!" he insisted. "Behold Rome greeting Gregory as it greeted Urban, rose-garlanded. Behold him celebrating Mass in the restored Lateran. The picture appeals to sentiment. But what then? Do you believe that Cardinals will be less intent on their pomps, or Papal legates more unworldly?"

"Of a surety," replied Stefano; "if Gregory summons the courage to break loose from France, he will also have courage to uproot those foul weeds that poison the garden of Holy Church, and to plant virtuous fruit-bearing trees in their place." He had caught, Neri was irritated to observe, the very phrases of Catherine. "Also he will start a crusade, and then we shall purify Christendom. Our mother tells me that the Duke of Anjou has promised her to be the leader! If she permit, I shall go also!" said Stefano joyfully. "I shall fight the infidels—and perhaps convert some of them," he added as an afterthought.

Neri ignored the last part of this naïf speech.

"You will never make a reformer out of Gregory," he said sombrely. "Our mother's high passion may stimulate him to an act of personal sacrifice which he has long meditated. But he will never attack others, never uproot and replant. He is of too affectionate a nature. A weakling sits in Peter's chair."

"He would find supporters," hesitated Stefano. "There are many who wish reform. There is——"

"His Grace the Archbishop of Bari?" suggested Neri scornfully.

The other laughed.

"I grant that that choleric prelate has the gift of making holiness unpleasant. What would you of a Neapolitan turned ascetic?"

"Behold the Church!" mused Neri. "The good within her fold are weak; they dream or acquiesce. Only the bad are strong. By those who crave and clutch and push are empires established, and the race led on. In the end, the individual probably profits. Is not this the law of life as expounded to me by the head of Christendom himself? The Cross has failed."

De Frontaigne, the three-months' friend, would have known that the words, coming from Neri, were epoch-marking. But not to this new friend would Neri have ever betrayed the formal loyalty to the convictions of Catherine, which was now the only anchor of his troubled spirit. To Stefano, the first part of the speech was bewilderment, the end a blasphemy.

"Neri! My brother!" he exclaimed in horror.

Neri looked at him darkly.

"Does it so much matter?" said he. "I was on a mountain-top of late. The distant seas, the shining heights, the clouds and mists were very fair. Even as the habitation of the Most High did they appear to me. But of these lovely creatures of God, not one was in the likeness of the Cross."

Stefano, puzzled, distressed, smiled presently into his friend's face.

"The Cross is where man is," he replied. "Look around, my brother. See the beams above our heads. Consider these walls, how they are built. Look from the casement over the town. All structure wherein we men may shelter us, depends upon the Cross."

It chanced, as Stefano stood within the sunlight, that the shadow of the beams of the casement made the holy sign on the floor at his feet. Neri looked lovingly at his friend's beautiful manhood—vigorous, consecrate, and pure; then sighed again.

"The reform of the Church! How can you, Stefano mine, behold the ecclesiastical machine and believe it possible?"

"Does not Catherine believe?" asked Stefano simply. "That is enough for me!"

"But not for me!" cried Neri, a strong revulsion of feeling betraying itself in impatient accent. "No echo, I. I look at life through my own eyes—through those of no dreamer, however holy."

He departed abruptly, leaving Stefano, grieved and shocked, to muse over the alien mood that possessed his friend in this alien city. This distress, like all others, he bore straight to Catherine, and, as happened, on the very morning when she was preparing for what she was convinced would prove the decisive interview with Gregory. She listened, solicitous, but at first a little impatient, to his account.

"This is a time to assert, not to deny or doubt!" she cried; but presently realized, it may be, that, absorbed in public affairs, she had been oblivious to the needs and sorrows of one little lamb of the flock.

"Send your dear brother to me this evening," she said. But when Neri, obedient, stood before her, the great decision which the morning had in effect witnessed filled her soul.

"On the day when I gave you your commission, my son," she said to him, "we mourned over the Church laid waste, with none to save. Rejoice, rejoice with me, and be exceeding glad; for this day beholds the dawn of great deliverance! This very morning our Holy Father, Christ on earth, has given me his solemn word to return in the

month of September to the field of martyrs, to the city of Peter! Even now his commands are issued very secretly for departure."

She was a thing of light, an alabaster vase within which glowed the flame of ecstasy. But no answering glow awoke in the grave face of the young secretary. Catherine beheld him with amaze.

"Dear, my son," she said gently, "this day are thy great hopes and mine, thy prayers and mine, fulfilled!"

But the smile of Neri was as sad as tears.

"Hearken!"—she was trying with all a mother's tenderness now to arouse his answering joy—"to thee has been given a great part in this great work."

Neri looked his incredulity. Was it possible that Catherine had been blind to his failure—his utter failure, he told himself—to render efficient service?

"On the first day of my arrival thou didst tell me," she said, "of the secret vow registered by Gregory after his betrayal of the trust of the holy Bridget. It was by reminding him of this that I finally won the long battle, and put an end to delays. Thanks be to our Lord, who hath placed us in the battlefield as knights of His most holy Cross."

She was trembling on the verge of a rapture.

Neri spoke for the first time. "And did you," he asked, with the old tone of quiet satire, "tell Gregory the source of your information?"

"But no!" answered Catherine. "What mattered the source? Messer our Lord God told me this great fact through your chosen lips. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad! for you have had a share in this great work."

Ever sensitive to her mood, Neri was aware of the restrained disappointment which his reception of her tidings was inflicting. Distressed at first by her avowal of the use to which she had put his confidence, he understood her in an instant. Her swift spirit had used in perfect simplicity a means which a lagging analytical conscience had rejected. It was all one to Catherine how information reached her, all means to her habitual thought being supernatural alike. The important thing to her mind had been to recall the vow to

the mind of the Pope, nor had it occurred to her that one not living on her own spiritual level might be more affected by miracle than by moral appeal. Neri's hint of satire was foolish, and to her incomprehensible cruelty. Very carefully would he weigh his next words that they might not grieve her.

"You may indeed rejoice, my mother. This is no small thing, but a great. Where poets, sages, and holy men have failed for seventy years, you have succeeded. It is a moment that history will remember."

The speech was punctilious, measured, uninspired.

"It is a moment over which the angels sing!" cried Catherine. "Do you sing with them and me!"

"That I cannot do," said he.

Catherine was perfectly accustomed to deal with recalcitrant sinners. An unresponsive disciple was perhaps a new experience. She looked at Neri, almost helpless. Seeing the sorrow in his face, full recognition of him for the first time since reaching Avignon awoke within her eyes.

"Son of my heart," she said with tender yearning, "lacking thy joy, my joy is unfulfilled."

"Turn, then, to Stefano; there shall you find the echo you desire."

Before the constrained words were out a passion of shame overswept the speaker, but they were uttered. They flew circling, like stinging insects it seemed to him, around the room. He saw them darkening before his eyebrows, and lifted his hand to brush the swarm away. It was fearfully hot—the August heats suffocated soul as well as body.

But Catherine's face had cleared. Her ecstasy had gone, had yielded to sorrow and shame, that a human weakness should thus intrude on her great hour. Yet at least it was a weakness that she understood, and for all the frailties of the heart of man her sympathy was a deep that called upon the deeps of Infinite mercy.

"Dear son of my affections," she said firmly, "Stefano and thou shalt alike labour for the sweet Bride of Christ where and as God wills. And if his power of service to that sweet Bride and to me be greater than thine, thou shalt give thanks

to God, tearing from out thy soul, by help of prayer, that evil plant of jealousy which I perceive to flourish rank therein."

"Have I complained? Have I intruded?"—Neri was very white and proud. "Have I sought to draw him from your side?"

"None of these things," returned Catherine, "but thou hast resorted to a proud humility, which is really an offshoot of pride. Thou hast said to thyself that thou wouldst pay us no attention, but keep entirely to thyself, abasing thee with a perverted scorn. Wherefore thou hast ceased to long for the salvation of souls with a free heart and with passionate desire; and the need of the Bride of Christ has become as nothing to thee through the delusions of the devil."

"You do not understand! You understand nothing!" cried Neri in agony. Wild, incoherent phrases were all he could command. "That Bride is no true spouse; these women of Avignon, are they not her image? This evil town has robbed me. . . ." Speech lagged and failed; the black swarm was circling still. Again he sought to beat them away.

Catherine drew near anxiously, and placed her cool, long fingers on his brow, on his head.

"Fever is on thee!" she exclaimed. "And I think of the flesh, not the spirit."

But Neri drew away. At the touch, however, he had recovered his self-control.

"Fear not, grieve not, my mother," he said sadly. "All that is left me is that you at least shall be glad. Forgive that I have troubled for you the glory of this day, and let me go!"

"Nay!" pleaded Catherine. "Nay, my son in Christ. Only speak to me. I hear."

Neri lifted grave eyes to the solicitous, loving face. "I may not speak," said he. "I have no words that you could understand or that I would that you should understand. Tread your high path unfaltering still, nor heed me if that path be mine no more. And do not trouble," he added, seeking to smile reassurance as she looked on him wistfully;

"I think not that I am ill, only a little fevered, it may be, by these late heats."

He withdrew, grieving most that he had grieved the beloved, yet conscious that her sorrow would seek relief in prayer, and be absorbed in her lofty gladness. At least, he had said nothing to lessen that gladness. Better far for her, and so for him, that she attribute his strange mood to the crudest cause—to that jealousy of Stefano which was so alien to his deeper being that he could hardly believe it really astir within. His hasty words were sick torture to pride to remember, but at least they had precluded all possibility of revealing that agony of soul, deeper than the agony of heart, if less poignant, which racked him day and night.

CHAPTER X

THE GREAT DEPARTURE

Less than three weeks later, in the early morning of September 18, de Frontaigne, a little breathless, entered Neri's lodgings. The interest in existence, which was Louis' form of vitality, and which the keen face always showed was raised to excitement.

"The Papal galleys lie in the Rhone!" he exclaimed, "brought there secretly overnight. None knew aught of the matter! 'Tis rumoured that Gregory is to start for Rome now, at once! Come, let us see the great spectacle!"

"I was just starting," returned Neri tranquilly.

De Frontaigne looked in dismay, first at his friend, then at a dismantled room.

"Yes," Neri answered the questioning look. "We also leave to-day, but by the land route. The Holy Father has defrayed the expenses of our journey. But we shall travel like pilgrims, as poor men all, not in such state as I came."

"You never told me that I was to lose you," said de Frontaigne, sobered.

"I could not," Neri apologized. "The whole matter, as you may surmise, has been most carefully guarded. Our mother advised this secrecy to spare the Pope further argument. But come, we shall lose the spectacle."

"I care for the spectacle less than I did," said de Frontaigne ruefully. But as they ran downstairs he broke out: "Your holy mother does not lack the wisdom of this world. Only spurred to a sudden act like this, could Roger de Beaufort ever have made a start."

From the high step of the house they surveyed the narrow street, filled with a hastening throng. Incredulity, amusement, anger, ruffled the faces, as light and cloud and rippling breeze, the surface of a stream. A group of clerics passed, disgust overshadowing them ; an eddy of schoolboys left mocking laughter in their wake. It was a French throng, vociferous, dramatic, a-quiver. The young men plunged, and were swept along to the Rhone, in a tumult of chatter and clatter.

"'Tis the doing of the holy maid from Siena!"

"And a holy trick she has played on messieurs les Cardinaux."

"The Pope's own family knew not of the plan."

"They say his old father fainted when he heard——"

"Rome ! 'tis a fearsome city ! More wolves than men in the streets, and great ghosts of dead heathen stalking openly at high noon."

"Eh, think of leaving fair France for such——"

"His Majesty the French king will be prettily enraged."

"And Giovanna of Naples, our most gracious lady queen, who ceded the town to the Holy Father in reparation for her many and grievous sins."

"Sins of a queen ! Né, né, my son ! Say rather, for the unusual number of her husbands."

"As you will, if one may also mention the death of the first."

"Gregory leave Avignon ? Never, my friends. At the last moment——"

"But yes, he is be-Catherined, bewitched !"

So the townspeople ; but the clerics, the chief element in the crowd, pressed on in sullen silence. Clever steering landed de Frontaigne and Neri high in the porch of the cathedral ; thence they beheld in effect great galleys anchored in the river, immediately below the stairway leading down from the Papal palace. They made a brave show. The brilliant scene was a pleasure-party in aspect ; in reality, the close of an historic epoch, the prelude of a tragedy to be.

By dint of an irresistible smile as much as by sharpness of

elbows, a handsome young Italian made his way to their side. He was protecting with careful affection a stout, pleasant-faced woman in the Dominican mantle. It was Stefano Maconi, escorting Monna Alessia.

"I am glad to have found you," he said low to Neri. "The hour for our start has been changed to nones."

"Is our mother here?" asked Neri, still lower.

Stefano shook his head.

"It was not deemed prudent. This may be an angry mob. Monna Alessia teased till I was forced to bring her to see the sight," he added laughing.

"And a sight it is!" exclaimed that kindly person. "I should be at my thanksgivings, that Christ on earth returns to his own, and my prayers that his courage fail not. But miserable my soul, I can think only of these superb robes. They may not be in accord with the blessed voluntary poverty practised by our Lord and messere the apostles, but they are joyful to behold, even as the bow in the clouds."

"No portent of peace, however," remarked de Frontaigne.

But Alessia did not heed.

"Look, Stefano, look!" she was crying. "Who are those, magnificent above others, gathering on the palace steps? How troubled, how angry they appear!"

"That," explained Louis, "is the family of the Pope. The old, aristocratic-looking man who gesticulates with such tremulous vehemence, is Count de Beaufort, his Holiness' father. They do indeed seem agitated!" he remarked with a chuckle.

"Il poverello!" said Alessia pityingly; then clutching Neri's arm: "What is about to happen?" she gasped.

For the clamorous French tongues were still of a sudden. In the hush the tension grew. The door of the palace opened, and Pope Gregory, attended by a small retinue, was dimly seen within. His face made a small white blur among the shadows. But as he advanced into the light that streamed inward, men caught, even before the features were clear, a look transfiguring the gentle Roger de Beaufort into the high priest of the Most High God.

As he stepped to the threshold his old father, grey hair waving in the wind, rushed forward and threw himself full across the great stone. While he lay barring the passage his sobs, his broken pleadings were faintly audible to all. Gregory's eyes rested on the prostrate body: then, as by some inner compulsion, were lifted, and gazed out, not upon the heavens, but straight before him.

"He sees Rome," whispered de Frontaigne.

"He sees Christ!" whispered Alessa.

Neri knew better. Standing unattended in the throng, all but hidden by her long veil, he had some moments since descried Catherine. She had now drawn the veil quietly back. Prayer poised upon her lips; her eyes, wide-gleaming, held the eyes of Gregory; and the light in his face and in her face were one.

In clear tones, audible to the very outskirts of the throng, the Pope began to chant a psalm.

"Super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis: et conculcabis leonem et draconem."

With firm step, and face uplifted still, he strode over the prostrate Count de Beaufort. As a moment later he passed nearer, his eye caught Neri's, and once more he chanted, but this time in an undertone:

"Thou hast sent forth Thy light and Thy truth that they should lead me: even to Thy holy hill: even to the City of Peter: even to the hill of the Cross."

He advanced, still with that strange dignity upon him, descended the steps, and mounted the richly-decked palfrey that was waiting. The beast, on starting, stumbled and fell.

"A portent!" cried the crowd.

"The courage of a weak man is certainly severely tried," frowned Louis.

The Papal family, surrounding the trembling old Count de Beaufort, who had been helped to his feet, watched, breathless. But the Pope, his face a shade more pallid, waited till the beast had regained its footing, remounted, and with features set and motionless, rode away, followed by a small retinue. Pope Gregory XI. had left Avignon.

Alessia—and not she alone—was weeping.

"His old father," she sobbed, "he trod upon his old father! Oh Catherine, our mother, can this be a blessed thing which thou in thy power hast wrought?"

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In a few moments Stefano led her gently to Catherine's side, and the two women left the scene. But the men lingered an hour watching the departure of the morose Cardinals, to whom strict orders had been issued to join his Holiness, as promptly as might be, at Marseilles. It was a fine opportunity to study sacerdotal facial types. Now and then a scholarly countenance detached itself with startling effect from the coarse or sly majority. Once, twice, among the keen lines of such a countenance, played the hovering unmistakable light of personal sanctity; but the general effect was discouraging enough, so thought Neri, watching moodily; nor he alone.

"When the Babbo is at home, the first thing he must do is to depose all these, and appoint a fair brigade of virtuous men in their place,—so says the Mother," remarked Stefano cheerfully.

Louis laughed—his little, low laugh, kindly and amused.

"And why not, messere?" cried the other. Louis had jarred on him in their rare encounters. "In this great hour, when the Pope returns to his own, permit us to hope great things."

"Hope, monsieur, by all means," replied the Frenchman.

Neri turned on him absently.

"What has been in your mind as you have watched the spectacle?" he asked.

De Frontaigne, noting his friend's brooding face, spoke with unusual reluctance.

"The certainty," he said, hesitating a little, "that Roger de Beaufort will repent. He is of no temper to persist in a course displeasing to others, painful to himself. Within a year"—he checked his speech, compunctious,—"heed me not, prophet of evil that I am!" he cried.

"Within a year," Neri continued the phrase, "the

reaction will set in. He will probably revolt from the influence of Catherine. Great suffering, I fear, awaits her. Gregory, I thought, looked very ill."

"Not so ill as you," said Louis, solicitous. "Take my advice. Let your party go without you. Stay here—share my lodgings, let me care for you. I have a good bit of medical knowledge. You can join the others later."

"I? Stay in Avignon?" Neri lifted startled eyes upon him, then looked around for Stefano, who had slipped away. "No, no! I thank you, but I am quite well—that is, I am not ill, I think—or if ill, it is not here that cure could wait me."

Louis sighed.

"Avignon, I fear, has not brought you all blessing, my friend," he said with genuine sorrow. "Better had you stayed at home."

"Say not that!" Neri roused himself from his abstraction. "I seek no recluse peace. I would open my spirit wide to all that life may bring. By whatso channel it can find, my river seeks the sea. I know no more."

"One thing let me say"—Louis spoke gravely, his face lit by rare feeling—"whatever Avignon and I have brought you, to me you have brought a gift. I have learned in watching you a lesson unsurmised before: that fidelity may be as high a quality as enlightenment. It is a lesson I shall ponder."

"I thank you," said Neri simply.

"Louis, farewell," he added, after a moment's silence. "Should we never meet again, remember that I thank you always."

"But we shall meet!" The other forced himself to speak cheerily, lightly. "Europe grows smaller every year. Think of me as you cross the Alps."

"I shall think of you more often than you know," replied Neri.

CHAPTER XI

HEALING

Neri, unable to lie still for the agony in his head, crawled on all fours over the floor of his vaulted chamber in the house of Madonna Orietta Scotta, in Genoa. He was a worm and no man. Poor worms! Poor men! If the pain in one worm could throb like this, how it must hurt the stars to trail through the sky! "A very scorn of men, and an outcast of the people," that was it. Some worms, some men, slept now and then. He was not that kind of worm. When had he last slept? He had been travelling a long, long time. No one had understood about his being a worm. It would have troubled them, and they were all so gay. One—the tall woman, the radiant, the noble—had taken a little child of swollen, twisted body into her arms one day. It had fallen sound asleep, and waked laughing—healed, they said. If only he could be gathered up so he too might sleep. But, no, she kept him far from her, with only now and then a pitying look that hurt. Hateful men had been about lately, who wagged the head, looked grave. Yes, of course, the doctors! He knew now. . . . Arrived with the rest of the pilgrim band at this hospitable house, he had at last been forced to acknowledge himself ill. There was Stefano watching him—what distress in the dear face! Yes, Stefano, yes; we will be good now! You shall help me get back to bed, and we will lie quite still, and not think about worms.

All the way from Avignon, all the long, weary road the fever had pounced, then sprung away, leaving him free; then pounced again. What a great cat fever was! Its claws could

clutch and tear. Now, now, they are tearing his brain! It is no matter, Louis. Do not grieve.

The pain? Why it is very pleasant to be hurt. It helps one to forget. We are trying not to think, you know. Ah, what glory of snows, piercing the blue air! What a waterfall, singing, slipping, shining, down the cliff! What honey fragrance of flowers! But it is suffocating us! Stefano! for the love of Mary, air, air! Yes, I remember, the doctors ordered the pastilles burnt. Only I shall choke—die! It will not matter. Don't weep; our Mother will grieve if she sees that you have wept.

Why, certainly, they are the roses in the Belcaro garden. A worse death than one would suppose—to be smothered in roses. Flame roses every one, curled into fiery petal-whorls, dancing in the garden dusk under a red, red sky. The chariot of Amor? Ah, there it comes! The rose-chaplet has burnt Amor's brow. Oh, turn away from the tortured face of the poor young God of Love! No matter, we will see the pageant out. But that woman with Dominican robes must not be in the show. That is right. Lead her away. You are Master of Ceremonies you know, Louis, for Neri—Neri must wear the fiery circlet, and march with the rest.

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Gregory! Most Holy Father, do not caper about so strangely. Take off those striped clothes! At least, if you will wear them, put your tiara aside. Yes, you juggle excellently well with those many balls. White! Black! How high you toss them up; how deftly catch them! We see the trick. With each toss a white ball turns black. They are all black now, and messere the Cardinals are grinning. Horror! Are those the Cardinals? Hoofs in red stockings! Horns peering out under the cap? The scarlet robes are flames of a burning village, and the great grim Cardinal-devils point long claws and hiss applause, while the mountebank weeps, weeps, weeps. And Neri weeps too.

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The blessed peace of the wide-glimmering sea. What are these golden columns through which the waters shine?

* * * * *

Louis de Frontaigne, in long robe, stood within the ruins of a great temple, the sea before him, violet hills behind. From the summit of an island-mountain in the bay a slender smoke drifted upward.

"What is your wand for?" Neri asked.

Louis looked very sage.

"I have learned somewhat," said he. "Science is not the end of life, but life the end of science. Art is not the end of life, but life the end of art."

"Science—the end—life—art." Neri clung to the words, repeating them over and over to himself with painful precision. If he let one slip, good-bye to his mind! If he held them, the key to the universe was his. Louis, meantime, was tracing circles in the grass.

"This is the Bay of Naples, you know," he remarked casually yet significantly.

"I always wished to see that region. It was a good idea to come." Neri tried to answer with equal ease; to himself he was still droning anxiously about science and art.

"And therefore," Louis went on, "we shall naturally think in Greek."

"But I am trying not to think in any language," Neri remonstrated, alarmed. "You see—my head——"

"It will serve every purpose if you see in Greek," his friend returned soothingly. "And that you cannot help doing in a moment."

He turned to the shore, and chanted very clear and loud, pure-vowelled words, resounding with great Ais and Oes. And as he sang the great sea stirred. It heaved, it writhed, it arose. With onward movement, as of a coiling snake, the whole vast liquid brilliance rushed upon the temple. Mighty billows of beryl curved and broke in sheets of whitest foam, or no, not foam, soft limbs of sea-nymphs, rather. Within the green translucence,—ah, the threatening splendour! Ah, the awful tottering wall!"

"Fear nothing!" Louis' voice sounded high and faint. "Your river has found the sea!"

The crash had come. In the depths of the ocean Neri stood alone. The temple still rose around him, no more a

ruin but perfect in every part. The light was emerald. He was by an altar or, no, he perceived without surprise that this was Fonte Gaia, from the campo at Siena: only complete as he had never seen it, for presiding over its basin there rose, there floated—what vision of all beauty?

"The White Lady!" he cried. "Then the Sienese did not break her to pieces after all!"

"Oh, they only broke the image," Venus laughed, stepping down to his side. "I am Lady of Siena still."

"I thought Madonna was that," said Neri, pursing his lips.

Venus glanced at him crookedly.

"I allow that person her little delusions," she replied, with a patronizing air. "You had better look into the fountain."

Bending down, he beheld first a dizzying glimmer, as of sun-rays reflected from wet bright pebbles set in gay pattern at the bottom. Presently his own reflection cleared; the face of Ilaria, lovely beyond all memory or dream, was bending beside it. He caught his breath.

"She was a princess when I saw her last," he mused.

"My handmaids have many disguises," said Venus.

"Oh stay! Stay so for ever!" cried Neri to the smiling face, elusive among the ripples.

"You do not need to strain your neck looking after an image," remarked Venus in a practical tone. "She is standing in the flesh beside you."

He lifted his head. She was there, in her gown creeping with bright broideries. She held to him a golden cup.

"Life is the end of art," announced Venus sententiously.

"Drink, Neri," Ilaria implored.

Strange sea-lights wavered about her beauty; but it was the voice of the little comrade of his youth.

"Certainly," said Venus to him. She had taken the cup, and was presenting it imperiously. "It is your peace at last. For the matter of that, you know that you have already plighted each other in my presence."

Doubting, he stretched out his hand, withdrew, advanced it.

"Beware!" cried someone; a friar, Gualtiero, fleeing past as in agony, a cord around his neck. "Beware!"

On the whiteness of Venus, on the rainbow brilliance of Ilaria, fell the shadow of mighty wings. Swooping down from the roof, one of the great demons of Lecceto hovered, poised hawk-like. Neri, horror-stricken, watched for the fiend to dart, to fasten his claws in Ilaria's bright hair, to bear her aloft, away, her shrieks trailing after her. But this did not happen. In a faint light like a mountain mist at dawn, the whole scene faded. He heard low singing, the voice of Catherine first, then, joining tremulously, the voice of Ilaria, blended in the hymn of Abelard:

> "Wish and fulfilment shall severed be ne'er,
> Nor the thing prayed for fall short of the prayer, . . ."

He was singing with them, in sweet accord; and, singing, was aware that somewhere, infinitely far away, Venus, unseen, was sobbing weirdly.

* * * * *

De Frontaigne stood with folded arms among the ruins.

"If you had been more prompt, the devil would not have got her," said he with his little laugh. "But you never could succeed in making up your mind in time."

"The devil did not get her!" exclaimed Neri.

Whereupon Louis laughed again, that low, well-bred, amused little laugh that Neri knew so well. And Neri burst into wild and violent weeping that seemed as if it would drain his soul away.

* * * * *

A sorrowful voice, the voice of Catherine, was speaking in an adjoining room.

"Dear my son, thou knowest not what thou askest."

"He dies, mother! The doctors renounce hope!"

This was Stefano, a catch in his breath. Real voices, these; Neri knew that. The fever had for the moment relaxed its grip. Death, he tranquilly surmised, was very near.

"And if he dies?" Catherine answered the grieving Stefano. "Why art thou thus troubled? If God wishes

now to crown thy brother Neri's labours, thou oughtest rather to rejoice than to mourn. Better, perchance, for him were it to escape at once to that country where is no confusion of mind, nor fear of being separated from God."

She spoke slowly, sadly, and with deep conviction.

"Better for him, I doubt not; but for us?" pleaded Stefano. "Oh, it is a holy soul, my mother! Since the fever set in, he has not ceased from chanting psalms; chiefly that psalm which our Holy Babbo was chanting as he passed us on the steps: 'Oh send forth Thy light and Thy truth'; the words are muttered over and over, very low, but plain. Just now he sang that hymn of Paradise ever so dear to him, with a look as of one listening to the angels. Truly, my heart cleaves to my brother. If he die, how can I live? You are occupied with great matters; but even while you hold conference with Gregory at night and keep him true, you must not forget your children. All the Famiglia mourns. I conjure you to help Neri, for if you will, you can. Have pity! Pray for him!"

Catherine sighed deeply. There was a pause before her answer.

"I pray for him ever," she said presently. "But if he yet lives in the morning, speak to me, and I will ask God at Holy Communion to restore his bodily health. And you, too, must pray that I may be heard."

And now Stefano came into the sick-room, busying himself with ministrations, a light of hope in the face.

The next morning, at the moment when Catherine, hearing Mass, passed into her ecstasy, the illness, to the amazement of the doctors, abruptly abandoned its hold. Sleep, deep and dreamless, blessed the poor racked body throughout the day; the sleep that leaves one's past life far behind, and from which one awakes in weak expectancy and helpless peace like a little babe new-born.

It was at the vesper hour that this waking came to Neri, and sunset light filled the gloom of the high-vaulted room. He had been dreaming gently. A distant silver gleam had filled him with strange comfort and strange sorrow. It was his home—the star of faith that he had lost, a sphere among

many spheres of light, shining very fair and very far. His wistful longing was charged, it seemed, with power—for the sweet light drew near, shining ever softer, larger. In its central radiance shone first the face of Catherine ; then, as light was added to light, the face of the Lord Christ. Even into the room it floated, it unfolded, to receive him to its heart.

He opened his eyes into the eyes of his Mother. She had been sitting by his bed, her hand upon his forehead ; and had just risen, intending to attend the Office, for which bells were ringing at San Lorenzo, close at hand. She spoke no word, nor did he. Indeed, the mystery of sleep was not wholly lifted from either flesh or spirit. Sight alone was awake, and it had wakened only to those grey, still eyes, dilated with a tenderness that made clear shining in the dusky room. She went, and left him with no sense of loss ; for through the casement the evening star looked in. Beyond the Castle of St. George that rose above the huddled street he divined the far trembling of the sea, quieted to a pure colourless memory of the day that had died, yet brighter still than the darkening skies. Over those twilight waters, as in the untroubled depths of Catherine's eyes, the Spirit of God was moving.

The absolute stillness of his body, in which no muscle had yet stirred, released the mind, and Neri knew himself, set free from languishment, possessed of his Sole Peace. A frequent phrase of Catherine's—"He who Is ! He who Is !"—was the rhythm of his breath. The quiet rapture broke its own spell in a moment; for, unaware, he began to murmur the words aloud, and with the sound and effort earth resumed her reign. But the natural fruits of spiritual ecstasy, so often, alas ! unrealized, were to be his for once, perhaps, in moral insight.

He lay long, the tears raining helplessly down his cheeks.

"I have sobbed twenty years away," he whispered at last to Stefano.

"Except ye become as little children," said Stefano gently, caring for him the while.

He was pale, but radiant. Neri smiled up at him in bliss. The words of the least spirit in Paradise were singing in his soul :—

"Frate, la nostra volontà quieta
Virtù di carità, che fa volerne
Sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta.

* * * * *

In la sua voluntade è nostra pace :
Ella è quel mare al qual tutto si muove . . ."

Was there irreverence if that great Will wherein is our peace was to his weariness revealed for the time being in the will of God's handmaid, Catherine? The strain and turmoil of the past months was vanished. He watched Stefano, wondering. The love between this brother of his spirit and Catherine had become beautiful to contemplate, as the changing lights on the sea. For himself bitter craving was no more. Had there been a touch of purely individual feeling in the unfathomable tenderness of the look he had waked from delirium to behold? Or would that same look have been bent on any other of her suffering children—nay, on any sufferer? He was able to put the question to himself almost indifferently. The existence of that tenderness, on whomsoever lavished, was an all-sufficing fact. In other wise than on Mont Ventoux he learned that a man could become one with the mighty life surrounding his narrower self till personal craving was merged in larger contentment, and, so losing himself, should find.

Lying peacefully convalescent, Neri looked back from a still haven on the storm that had shaken him at Avignon. Had a great enfranchisement or a great imprisonment befallen him there? Life, the master, would show him in good time. Certainly the entrance into fresh intellectual regions which had intoxicated him for the time seemed less important now. For one thing, he perceived the passion for novelty as synonymous with progress to be a mere delusion of the arch-wizard, Time. How fascinating the impulse of Louis and other eager minds he had known of late to penetrate the world's future, to form the advance-guard of thought! Well and good, but might it not be better still to dwell with Catherine in the Eternal? The order of ideas in which she had her being was neither new nor old—it had been from the beginning, it would be to the end. And in the

solemn hush of this great hour, her disciple, returning from the confines of the Unseen World, felt himself lifted, even as she was lifted, above the luring trivialities of Time.

Another truth he had learned afresh at Avignon. Faith was activity, not vision, and in the practice of this activity he had elected to live. Long ago his spiritual mother had taught him to obey this lesson in the personal life: not to murmur nor feel himself deserted of his God, though the eyes of others be blessed by a Light he might not see. Then, under her tutelage, had come the widening of experience, when the affairs of the Bride of Christ had become to him of primary moment, and the sorrow of perceiving the stain on her fair garments had been keener than all other pain. Then—Avignon; and what had he brought thence? In a flash he saw that it was the old uncertainty simply in a new sphere. Was a visible expression of the Divine idea in the collective life ever possible? Could it be permanent? Dared one hope that the Catholic Church furnished such expression? The questions baffled him still. But what if it were not meant that he should know the answer? If the very test of faith were obedience in the cloud? One thing at least he knew: in obedience alone could he find freedom. Refreshing fountains of the waters of humility rose from the arid wastes of Neri's weariness. "Care not to present a finished work to God, Who is Infinite Love and demands from thee only infinite desire"—the epoch-making, well-remembered words rang with new meaning through his soul. Yes! "infinite desire," constant aspiration, endless intercession, for the Church as for the world, was the activity that claimed him for its own.

PART III

"Thanks, thanks be to the highest God Eternal, who has placed us in the battlefield as knights, to fight for His Bride, the Church, with the shield of holiest faith."

"The soul, conversing with the true citizens, neither can nor will be one with them in their joy, but in their hunger, which they still feel as when they were pilgrims and wayfarers in this life."

"Nevertheless, I hold me in peace, for I perceive that nothing happens without mystery."

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA.

CHAPTER I

AT ROCCA D'ORCIA

It was vintage-time at Rocca D'Orcia. The slow-ascending curves of Monte Santa Fiora were touched with October gold, that vanished, merged in dusky purple, as the great slopes receded toward the uplands seamed with snow. In the plain the fertile fields reclaimed around the base of Castiglione and the Rocca gleamed russet with vines, grey with olive, while the chalk-lands stretched beyond, arid as of old. Up the steep turf below the castle climbed Neri—less easily than in his childhood, but buoyantly enough. He made his way to the old hawthorn-trees beneath the castle wall. Someone was waiting there.

"Ilaria, the thorn should be in blossom!" he called, as he drew near.

"My blossom-season is passed," she answered lightly. She was dressed modestly in white. Her cheeks, untinted by art, were very pale.

"It is always blossom-season where Proserpina treads; hers, even in autumn, is perpetual spring," said Neri, gazing up at her with content from the thymy grass where he had thrown himself.

She glanced down at him almost shyly.

"You look exactly as you did when you were a little boy," she reflected.

"I feel so, too," laughed Neri. "I have been old—oh, so very old, Ilaria! but I surmise one must pass through age to find real childhood."

"Perhaps I am not old enough to be young"—the tears rose in her eyes—"childhood seems far away."

Neri looked at her solicitously.

"Even here?" he asked. She gave him a wan, small smile.

"Just now, one might forget," she murmured.

"It is a great art to forget," said Neri tenderly. "You need it, Ilaria. I cannot bear to look in your dear eyes. Rest! You are in your old home, and here——"

"And here," she mimicked, "is Catherine Benincasa with a troop of priests and nuns. My usual fate pursues me."

"Priests and nuns are human beings like any others," replied Neri with spirit, "and often no less interesting."

"All the world is turning convent that is not battlefield," complained Ilaria. Look at this castle! Countess Bianchina was always severe, but now here is Isa becoming tertiary, and Benedetta, forsooth, wishing to be a nun. And where? In our Belcaro! Woe worth the day when Ser Nanni gave it to Catherine! Poor Proserpina! If she escapes thither by moonlight, she will meet the sisters, black and white, strolling in the rose-garden."

"What would you have," asked Neri sternly, "from a woman who has suffered like Madonna Benedetta? Two husbands lost before possessed! Her life would suffice to turn anyone to God."

"My God," retorted Ilaria, "does not care for leavings. Well, I shall be seeking different scenes before long. My husband sends me word to join him in the South."

"The South?" queried Neri. When last I knew, Bernabo was at——" He hesitated.

"At Cesena," Ilaria finished bitterly. "Oh, I abhor the word!"—and the two drew together, gloom and horror on their brows. The shrinking from bloodshed had always been a tie between them.

"Let us hope"—Neri was seeking to comfort her—"that Bernabo helped Sir John Hawkwood to save the women. In any case——"

"In any case," she interrupted, "'twas at command of Count Robert of Geneva, emissary of your dear Church, the massacre was wrought. Even Hawkwood shrank from it. How can people believe in Pope or Cardinal? These are things to crush one's faith."

Neri sighed, but made no answer.

"I have somewhat to say to you!" she said with sudden vigour. "I have long wished to say it. Neri, beware of my husband! He will work you harm if he can!"

"I have done him no wrong," said Neri sombrely.

She glanced at him significantly.

"You, of all men, should feel for that man a great compassion," she said with reserve; then, with a glimpse of her old mischief, "The Company of St. George is now making negotiations with Charles of Durazzo, at Naples. I am not ill-pleased that my husband wishes me to attach myself to the court of Queen Giovanna. Why do you not scold?" she added—Neri had started at the mention of Naples—"Why not cry out, 'Not there, of all places in Europe'? I see the words in your face."

"Partly," he replied, sombre still, "because your place is, without doubt, by your husband's side."

She moved away restlessly a few steps. He rose and followed.

"But the present is ours," said he.

Ilaria faced him, wide-eyed.

"Is it for nothing," he pleaded, "that you have been led here at this time, when Catherine moves through this wild life we know so well, an angel of purity and peace? Can you watch unmoved the throngs hastening over the mountains to meet her every day, as if drawn by a trumpet call?"

If there was a flash beneath the transparent lids, Neri did not perceive it. Ilaria broke into no scornful gibes.

"Your Catherine has grown old," she remarked irrelevantly. "And she looks extremely ill. The body of that woman suffers tortures."

"They are nothing to the tortures of her mind," sighed Neri.

Ilaria looked at him with genuine surprise.

"Tortures of mind? She is a person whose every wish is gratified."

"Ilaria!" cried Neri.

"Oh, I have watched her!" insisted the other. "Are you blind? Her wishes, naturally, are not the same as mine, but such as they are—— You need not look at me

thus bewildered. Do you not see that the one craving of Catherine is for power? Her whole being is set to dominate. You, Stefano Maconi, Gabriele, the entire Salimbeni family, Jacopo Tolomei—heaven save the mark!—what say I? the Pope himself!—all whom she meets, she sways to her will. All save me; I am a spirit of water; such can always evade the spirits of rock!"

Ilaria was laughing a little wildly.

"And Gualtiero?" asked Neri sternly. He was trying to repel the dream-picture called up by her last words, her figure standing by Fonte Gaia, in the green light under the waves.

Ilaria flung her hands out in sorrowful gesture.

"Oh, my poor brother!" she cried; "unfrocked, distraught! Ah, your bloodless women, who view all natural passion as disease, who draw men to their sides and smile, and when the poor things die of anguish, turn away rapt in celestial joys!"

"You do not know——" began Neri, but she interposed, not without dignity.

"I know the whole tragic tale. Think not that I blame you. You have done what you could. To place the poor lad under protection in his first religious home was a wise plan and good; but it is by evil fate that Catherine has come into these parts."

"Let us hope he will not learn of it," sighed Neri anxiously. "For the most he is as one dazed; yet ever and again he rouses, nor would any one then seeing him suspect a mind diseased. His painful obsession is I know not least of Catherine's sorrows."

"Her sorrows!" scoffed Ilaria.

"My cousin," cried Neri, "in the old days your imagination, if not your heart, knew how to sympathize. Read that life as you would read the pages of a poem. You say rightly that the wishes of Catherine are not as yours; but you shall rise with me to the contemplation of her holy will!"

She had made a gesture of rebuttal when first he spoke; but in his earnestness he had laid his hand on her pale fingers. They quivered, and Ilaria, raising her face, spoke sweetly:

"I will try, to please you," said she.

He drew deep breath.

"You think that success attends Catherine? Her path presses into gathering gloom. For all her efforts, war devastates Tuscany still. The reform of the Church"—he shrugged his shoulders—"is not yet begun. As for her influence in high places, I tell what is no secret: Pope Gregory has turned against her. He frets for Avignon; if health permit, will doubtless return thither. Her messengers are reprimanded, her advice despised!"

"Mortifying," reflected Ilaria; "but any woman can bear political failure. In the life of her affections, which is the thing that counts, you cannot deny that Catherine has her way."

"I perceive that her spirit is hidden from you," sighed Neri, discouraged; "but look, then, at what you understand. Do you not know that she lives under a fire of comment, public and private? Abuse, invective, attend her wherever she goes."

"That I know is true," Ilaria admitted; "and criticism is hard for women to endure."

"Those whom she loves are lost to her, one by one. Even to-day comes a message from Rome, bidding Fra Raimondo resign his office as her director, and betake himself elsewhere."

Ilaria's dimples rippled a little.

"Is he so great a loss?" she murmured.

Neri's face broke into like merriment against his will; then he sobered.

"There are pains on which one dares not touch," he said. "To lean upon the unworthy; to seek power in one's beloved and to find cowardice, to meet helplessness for heroism, exacting devotion when the times call for high sacrifice! Think not I speak of Fra Raimondo," he continued earnestly, "but did you only know how Catherine's friends and disciples press and pull at her skirts, whining demands for her personal presence, while her great soul would bind them all in one high fellowship of selfless service to lofty aims! Did you know their clamorous

craving for her love, their jealousies, their weak dependence——"

"Can love be too great to please a woman's heart?" interposed Ilaria.

"It may be too weak to please a heart like her's," he answered, but she shook her head.

"Ask me not to pity the woman whom you thus regard," she murmured with averted eyes.

Neri's hand still rested on her own; he drew it quickly away.

'We who thus regard her," said he in resolute tones, "reverence in her life an agony of which the end is not yet. We watch, helpless to aid. Nay"—and now his voice sunk very low—"it may be that our most loving loyalty avails not to make us share her high convictions concerning public matters, and so we add to that agony against our will."

Ilaria was long silent, looking over the waste, treeless lands. Each corrugated seam and crevice had shown with weird distinctness in the crystal autumn air. Now as shadows lengthened with the waning day, the stern, unbeautiful country revealed, as no more fertile scene could ever do, the pure loveliness of the caressing light. She watched, musing.

"Well, and what then?" she said at last. "Is not agony her choice, after all, and yours, strange folk that you are? Fifteen years ago, when you had climbed painfully up this slope and found me waiting here, your little back was sore for three days. Do you think your gaiety misled me just now? Well I knew that you had been visiting your old hermitage! How may I tell what you did there?"

"Rest comforted!" Neri smiled rather sadly. "The cave had grown too small for me to enter. Also, I confess, that looking at it from above, I judged it safer not to venture the scramble."

"There are other refuges," she began, but he broke in impatiently:

"Let me say once for all that I have learned from Catherine not to value bodily austerities too highly. Good are they, high, and commended by holy example from ancient days: yet means and incidents only. The soul depending on them grows, as she always says, censorious and for-

getful of wider aims. I use them little. St. Bernard told men, many a century gone, that love must transfigure, not destroy. Small need of extreme self-inflicted penances, to share, in days like these, the anguish that redeems the world."

Ilaria shuddered.

"I dream of a God who redeems through beauty, not through anguish," she mused.

"Yes!" he replied. "The beauty of the battlefield, where the knights of God fight even unto death for Christ and His sweet Bride."

"No battlefield for me," sighed she. "'Tis peace I crave—such peace as broods over this sunset world."

"The peace of a dying day?" asked Neri. "The peace I seek is that of a day which stoops not to evening."

"Peace—have you found it?" she asked him, her eyes fixed gravely on his own.

He paused. In repose his face was sadder than of old, stronger in self-control. Habitual reticence was added to the lines of instinctive reserve.

"No," he said at last. "I have never spoken a false word to you; I will not now. Since my return from Avignon, I am as one who gropes in twilight, by a path half-seen, toward a goal he does not know."

"And I," she said, "walk by so simple a way, if only——"

"If what?" he asked.

But she left the phrase unfinished. A certain innocence, purity even, seemed to invest her white figure, high in the great bleak landscape. Neri caught his breath as he looked at her, then set his lip firm.

"Mine is the pilgrim way," said he presently. "Not for me the peace of the goal. But there is a peace also of the quest; this would I not forego. Louis de Frontaigne, the friend of whom I have told you, said that he had learned from me that fidelity was better than enlightenment. I abide in patience and hope, striving for one thing only—that my holy desires increase. The land that lies below us is arid, and, as well we know, not fair to traverse; how we welcomed it, yet hated, travelling from Siena when we were little! Yet see

it, as now, from above ; it is fair as the rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald ; so in the life that has renounced all may be beauty yet, to the angels' vision. Sometimes I think the shadow on my pathway is cast by the Cross itself, and that only in the way traced by that shadow may one hope to attain the Open Vision. I wait, content."

Ilaria was gazing past the little green river that curved around the foot of the hill, to the purple mountain. The hollows in her cheeks transformed her beauty into something ethereal and faint.

"We will not bicker," she sighed. "Shall I waste the brief hour when we are side by side?" And a solitary nightingale, hid in the hawthorn-trees, sang of a sudden. "The present is ours ; you yourself have said it. Suffering lies behind us, and before ; why court it needlessly ? After long years of pain, one perfect moment comes. It might be here—it might be now," she said.

Her beauty, purified by illness, acquired in the lengthening shadows a grave exaltation consonant with the hour and the scene. As Neri contemplated her a pseudo-religious rapture seized on him. Unrest quivered over the tranquillity always induced by the presence of perfect loveliness, as over the surface of a still pool, hovers for a moment the wind that will presently break its calm into the myriad agitations of life.

A red sunset had suddenly flamed over the sky. As the cousins leaned, side by side, against the castle wall, Neri felt the rhythmic life in Ilaria's body. The wan, appealing face was close to his. An instant, and the passion of the sky leaped into it.

Neri's circumspection in conduct had always resulted from fastidiousness as much as from principle. Always, but especially since his stay at Avignon, he had been more ascetic in practice than in theory.

"I am tired—tired ! Help me to forget the years !" cried Ilaria, wavering toward him like a tall lily-stalk ravaged by storms.

Neri put out his arm and drew her to him ; her head rested on his shoulder as if Ilaria had found her home.

Tears rose slowly under her translucent lids; he longed with irresistible craving to kiss them away. Her mouth trembled.

* * * * *

He had thought to kiss the little comrade—the lonely, confiding, charming child so dear to memory. But at the first touch of her lips he knew in a flame that this was the handmaid of the White Lady whom he had taken to his bosom.

"Jesu! Mary! Catherine!" he cried instinctively.

But even before he spoke Ilaria's expression changed. Her eyes, fixed on something he could not see, dilated with horror. She sprang from his arms. Still scorched as if the lurid sunset had entered his soul and body, he turned, and faced a Franciscan friar, who had circled the hill by a path from Castiglione d'Orcia, and peered at them from around a corner of rock. Wild passion, fierce self-hatred, melancholic rage, had devastated the face of Gualtiero.

"Ah, pure one! Ah, holy and circumspect!" he hissed. "Scornful of my suspicions! Son whom Catherine is never weary of pointing out as model to poor me! Trusted and traitor! False cousin! False brother! False disciple!"

Ilaria was first to recover herself.

"Hush, Gualtiero," she said soothingly. "Neri was but consoling me for my illness."

But the friar went on unheeding:

"And me you exile! Me, who ask only to behold—to be in her presence! Quite still—oh so still I would keep. You shut me in the convent. But it was not such a long drop—and I had found my habit. She would never receive me unfrocked"—fixed light came into the eyes. "Hush! Listen!" he bade in a whisper. "Her voice!"

With the agility of madness he clambered into the hawthorne tree and leapt over the wall—a thing which no sane man could compass. Neri and Ilaria, glancing at each other aghast, circled the castle toward the gate as swiftly as they might. Before they reached it Ilaria was half laughing through her dismay. "It is not the first time we have had to take care of Gualtiero in a scrape," she gasped. But Neri sped onward with a groan.

CHAPTER II

THE DEMONIAC

The crowded courtyard was confusedly illumined by the red glare which had deepened in the sky. Among the rude men-at-arms, lolling, chattering, evidently quite at home, moved sundry Religious, mostly in the Dominican habit, bent on exhortation, or, as it would appear, sometimes on good-fellowship. Some of the soldiery met them with jeers, but these were few ; the greater number were listening with a certain rough seriousness. At one side of the court a group of peasants from the mountains surrounded two donkeys. On the back of one of the beasts was bound something large and dark. From the centre of this group, imparting an indescribable effect of wildness and dreariness to the scene, came stifled cries and yells, to which no one paid the slightest attention.

It was not easy to discover Gualtiero in the bewildering noise and movement ; but presently Neri, perceiving a grey habit amid the prevalent black and white, made his way to his cousin's side. The boy was quite still now ; his cowl drawn over his face, his eyes fixed on the gate of the castle-keep. He turned and smiled absently as Neri touched him. The anger of a moment before had died away. He even moved confidingly a little nearer to his cousin.

" Hark ! She comes !" he said. And in fact the great portal swung open, and the ladies of the castle appeared. The white-haired Countess Bianchina first—a noble and commanding presence—Madonna Benedetta, a sterner, younger copy of her mother ; Madonna Isa, more gentle, yet sharing

with the others the air of high rank and familiarity with command. Both the younger women, pending their admission to the Dominican Order, were attired with great simplicity, yet with suitable and dignified richness. Following the Countess, and conversing with Madonna Isa, came a woman in the familiar black and white.

Catherine, as Ilaria had said, was aged during the year which had passed since her return from France. The firm modelling of the features remained unchanged, but there was almost no flesh on the cheeks, and the lips were colourless. She moved as one in pain, yet with a certain majesty—authority of manner had certainly grown on her. Grown, too, was that peculiar stillness of bearing which had always marked her presence ; or it might be that this atmosphere was merely accented by the turbulent scene. Catching sight of Neri in the crowd she sent him one of her swift, transfiguring smiles, and his heart sank within him. Gualtiero she seemed not to see.

The court, at the appearance of the ladies, had become comparatively quiet, some, though not all, of the retainers having greeted their mistress with some sign of respect.

"Fra Raimondo," called the old Countess, with the assured voice of the ruler ; and the priest, a little more downcast in aspect than usual, made his way from a group of soldiers, and stood deferentially before her.

"Has the harvest of souls been good to-day ?" asked the Countess.

"Never better, Eccellentissima," replied Raimondo. "So many incarnate demons have been eaten up that Padre Tommaseo declares they give him the stomach-ache." And despite his melancholy expression he gave a little chuckle.

"Good!" said the Countess graciously. "I regret to learn, father, that you are to leave us. We bow to the will of our Holy Father. But all—above all your daughter Catherine—will miss you much."

The priest's face darkened.

"Holy obedience leaves me no choice," he said.

"Moreover"—it was Catherine, and in the undertones of her voice all the sorrows of the world seemed to echo—

"my dear father and I must learn to rejoice in pains and labours suffered for the Sweet Bride of Christ as in the dearest gifts that God can give us."

Ilaria, at a gesture from Neri, had joined the ladies. He saw her shrink in the shadow at these words. But the face of Madonna Benedetta had caught Catherine's uplifted look.

The noise in the court, quieted for a moment, had begun again; only fragments of talk drifted to Neri from the group on the steps. A letter from the Sienese Government, summoning Catherine home in terms of sharp reprimand, was under discussion. The ladies were indignant, and Catherine, while tranquil, yet showed a little natural resentment.

"Whether the Devil likes it or not," Neri heard her say, "I shall spend my life for the salvation of souls and the good of the city I love. I shall finish what I have begun."

"Plots?" exclaimed Madonna Isa presently. "It is a shame and insult for them to believe that you are plotting against the Republic. You labour for the honour of your fellow-citizens, and they cover you with reproaches."

"Well, we are plotting in a way," said Catherine more lightly—"plotting to root hatred out of all hearts, and to reconcile them to their neighbour. The only trouble is, that we work too lazily at this business; for the rest, one understands——"

The rest was lost; but Neri believed that she recognised in her heart that it was not strange if Siena was scandalized at her long stay in the stronghold of its enemies. He himself had at times marvelled at her devotion to the interests of this great aristocratic family, till it dawned on him that for a woman of her antecedents, this devotion was one evidence among many of escape from prejudice.

The Countess Bianchina was evidently speaking of the Sienese Government with slight respect.

"But what I do appreciate," she was presently heard to say, "is that you should remain with us in spite of the urgent pleading of your mother and your friends. I am a mother myself; I can well understand that it is scant comfort to Monna Lapa to look across to the Rocca from Montepulciano."

"What would have happened to the Church"—Catherine spoke with unusual impetuosity—"if the apostles and our sweet Mother Mary had chosen to remain together and enjoy their affection, instead of scattering to labour for the salvation of the world? Friends must love one another in God, and He unites them or separates them as He sees fit. What shall we do? How shall we behave on great occasions if we are weak in little ones, and feel unreasonable pain at what cannot be helped?"

Yet her eyes, as she turned to Fra Raimondo, were full of tears. She began talking to him in low, eager tones, in which affection, regret, and encouragement were blended.

The Countess, meantime, moved to the corner of the courtyard where the peasants were still gathered with their mules. At the first appearance of the ladies a fearful scream had been heard, cut strangely short in the midst. Bianchina bent over the bundle on the donkey's back, curiosity and horror in her face; spoke in a low tone to the peasants, and returning to the door, drew Catherine aside. The latter at first shook her head emphatically, seeming to shrink in distress. She tried to enter the house, but Isa and Benedetta, barring the entrance, joined their petitions to those of the mother. Catherine lifted appealing eyes to Fra Raimondo.

"How can you hesitate, my daughter?" said he quite loud. "I command you by holy obedience to allow this poor demoniac to be brought into your presence."

At once she made a gesture of submission, and stood in drooping expectancy. At a motion of the Countess, four or five stout men raised the struggling mass from the donkey's back, and brought it forward. The noise in the yard, resumed for a little, stopped suddenly, completely. All heads craned to see. Gualtiero was standing rigidly still; but Neri felt a slight quiver run over him as Catherine bent her eyes on the writhing mass deposited below her on the steps. The ladies involuntarily withdrew a step higher. Ilaria covered her face.

Catherine descended and stood beside the peasants.

"This poor man is in agony!" she exclaimed sharply. "Take the gags out of his mouth."

"But he screams hideously, sister," said the chief peasant, ducking his head, "and utters blasphemies unheard of, indecent for pure ears."

"Shall I command twice?" said Catherine in a low voice; and the startled peasant, after one glance at her, obeyed with alacrity.

Hardly were the gags removed when yells and shrieks and vilest words made the air tremble. Not one, but many wild beasts, so it seemed, gifted with power to articulate human words, were yapping together.

"The tongues of hell are let loose! A whole chorus speaks through him!" shuddered the bystanders, stopping their ears.

But to Neri there was a sound more terrible than those ravings, for as they broke forth Gualtiero began to moan—short moans, regular, very low, unheeded by the crowd intent on that terror by the steps, pitiful beyond words, the moans not of devils, but of a dying soul.

Catherine was speaking through the uproar.

"Cut these bonds!" said she; "do you not see how cruelly they tear the flesh?"

"We dare not!" protested the peasant, and turned from the inexorable eyes to face the Countess. "We dare not, in truth, Your Highness. This is a beast raging. He will spring on Sister Catherine first of all!"

And, indeed, chief among the horrible blasphemies were those levied at the pale woman who was standing very still, compassion, authority, prayer, and awe, illumining her eyes.

"Cursed be Catherine, our enemy! The stench of hell overcome her! The demons tear her! Oh take us from her sight!" shrieked the voices; the most terrible thing about them was that they were emitted with no movement of the rigid, foaming lips.

"Obey—ah, make haste!" cried the Countess, twisting and untwisting her hands.

Catherine, absolutely calm, made a gesture of authority. The soldiers had shrunk back. Neri and Gualtiero were in the front rank now. Fra Raimondo was on the upper step of the porch, behind the women.

The peasants stooped, holding their breath, and severed the great cords that bound the limbs of the wretched demoniac. He waved arms and legs an instant in strangest guise—he was a black, powerful man—then made one leap at Catherine's throat.

Neri, on the alert, started forward, but there was no need. The hairy hand paused in mid-air ; the man stopped, as if checked by an invisible force. A wondering dawn woke in the darkened visage. The arm dropped. He rose to his full height.

"The cords are cut ! This body—my body—is free !" He spoke in an entirely new voice—hoarse, weak, amazed, wholly natural.

"So be your soul, creature of God, freed from the bands of the devil !" said Catherine, clear and sweet.

He dropped on all fours at her feet, moaning, whining, shuddering, as if many half-silenced beasts were yapping within him.

Catherine swiftly sat down on the lowest step and gathered the great hairy head and shoulders into her lap, pillowing them most gently. She began to talk into the man's ear, so low that the bystanders could hear naught save the constantly repeated name of Jesus. At first the moans and whines rose into snarls at each such mention, but less and less ; presently, very softly, she began to sing, old Latin hymns and lauds in the vernacular, and at a gesture from her Neri and the Dominicans gathered in the courtyard ventured near and sang also.

"Crux in omnibus pressuris,
Et in gravibus et duris
Est totum remedium.
Crux in pœnis et tormentis
Est dulcedo piæ mentis,
Et verum refugium,"

chanted the disciples gently.

Gradually the distended eyes, the snarling mouth, relaxed, and before long a quiet sleep had blessed the sufferer. The peasants and many of the soldiery had dropped to their knees.

"See," whispered Catherine, brooding, tender as a mother-

bird over her fledgling—"see the poor limbs! The blood is caked on them—ah, cruel, cruel! Monna Isa, Monna Benedetta, Monna Ilaria, bring me, I pray, warm water and soft clothes, that I may wash and bind them."

And while the evening star shone out in the fading sky she tended the rough gaunt creature with the assistance of the ladies from the castle.

It was past the supper-hour, and still she sat there, for when she sought to move her patient stirred and groaned. Nearly all had withdrawn from the courtyard. The great October moon had risen; it shone full on her black and white raiment, and on her face, now radiantly serene.

Ilaria stepped to Neri's side.

"Rouse Gaultiero," she whispered; "you must lead him back to the monastery. I have begged Brother Matthew Tolomei to accompany you."

Neri signed grave assent, not moving his eyes from his mother's face, on which he held them fixed in rapt contemplation.

"Do you seek true beauty, Ilaria?" he murmured, still without moving his gaze. "Behold it! Do you seek true peace? It is here. Be abased—even as I also am abased!"

Her look followed his bidding, and dwelt thoughtfully on the figure in lowly attitude, bending with pure and heavenly tenderness over the dark face and form below. The face of the demoniac was upturned to the sky; a strange repose rested upon it. The whole scene was softened by the blending of moonlight with a light that yet remembered the day.

"It is wondrous fair," Ilaria admitted, awestruck. Then, raising her voice of a sudden: "But vainglory all! Vainglory, and passion for power!"

Catherine, at the vibrating voice, raised startled eyes; she did not see Ilaria who was standing in the blackest of shadows.

"I perceive that the demons are still near," she said simply; and, indeed, at Ilaria's words her patient had stirred and cried. Catherine made the sign of the cross and bending low resumed her crooning lullaby of holy hymns.

"Gualtiero, follow me!" said Neri, touching his cousin gently on the shoulder.

The friar had not ceased from his low regular moaning. In the great hush that had fallen, Neri had marvelled that Catherine paid it no heed. Now, he started from his seeming trance and leapt forward into the full moonlight.

"Bless me, even me also!" he cried, almost precipitating himself upon the body of the demoniac.

Catherine, still not glancing at him, raised a long, warning hand.

"Beware!" she said, speaking as one very far off. "Waken not this creature of God!"

But Gualtiero dragged himself upon his knees, and lifting his arm, touched tremulously her still uplifted hand. Then recognition came to her, and with it a deep flush of shame, visible even in the moonlight, transfiguring her face into a strange semblance of youth.

"Lead your poor brother away at once," she said to Neri, and as Gualtiero broke into wild, stifled appeals, she added, but still without addressing him:

"I hear a voice; I see no soul. Here is none to whom I may minister. But a presence troubles the sick. My son Neri, remove it swiftly." So saying, she bent once more over her patient, who, indeed, was troubled sufficiently to need her care. And Neri, using the power of will as well as hand, led forth the unresisting Franciscan, who bore him as one dazed and lost.

Brother Matthew Tolomei was waiting outside the court with mules, and in a great moonlight, white as any day, Neri conducted his cousin across the wild hill-country to the monastery on the mountain-slope from which he had escaped. Gualtiero spoke not at all, his troubled brow was bent upon the ground, he uttered continually that low moaning. His fingers as continually played with the knotted cord around his waist. And in this strangest of nights Neri gazed deeper than ever he had before into the dark abysses of our being. He shrank and shivered when they emerged into moonlight, craving the moonless black of deep mountain ravine or of those frequent moments when flying cumuli blotted from sight the unearthly radiance.

In a ghostly dawn they reached the still sleeping monastery, above which the small mountain village clung like lichen to the cliff. As Neri lifted his hand to the bell, Gualtiero roused from his torpor. The two cousins faced each other, both, as Fra Matteo noticed with surprise, with the same gesture of shame and diffidence. Why, he asked himself, should shame be felt by Neri the spotless? Then Gualtiero spoke.

"Did I say harsh words to you once—last month, last year—in a red sunset?"

His speech was curiously slow, difficult, constrained.

"True words and just, my brother," returned Neri.

"I would unsay them if I may."

Still Gualtiero spoke with that unnatural measure to the words.

"You cannot; they are seared upon my soul," Neri replied—but gently. "Do not trouble, you were the messenger of God."

"Your soul!" said Gualtiero. He lifted his face to the east, and suddenly the light of his lost boyhood seemed restored. For a moment he was beautiful, as in the old childish days when the three little comrades had played among these hills. "Your soul! I see it. It is a crystal sphere without a flaw. Mists blur its surface, but you need not fear. Wait till the sun be risen. For me—I was your brother, but am naught. Farewell! Care for Ilaria. Care —care——" The moans, the writhing of the hands began again. Again the eyes distended, and Neri hastened to trust the distracted mind and suffering body to the pitying care of the monks.

He did not return to Rocca d'Orcia, but sending word that he intended to make a retreat, established himself in a deserted hermitage above the village. Far away, far below, twin-dots upon the plain, could be discerned the Rocca and its sister-castle; Neri turned his eyes by preference to the mountain-mass that loomed overhead. Here, unquestioned by the simple mountain folk, he lived for some weeks a life of entire retirement, and of no inconsiderable physical hardship, watching meanwhile over the fortunes of his cousin.

Gualtiero's illness had deepened—the form was increasingly painful. Once, twice, in lucid intervals he wrote to Neri letters terrible in pathos. It was as if, even in extreme agony, he were still struggling to unsay his condemnation. "To Neri, my dearest brother, of all the friends and servants of God"—so ran the superscription of the last. It ended with a note of despair: "I make neither beginning nor end to this letter, for there is none to me," wrote Gualtiero. "Neither will I put my name to it, for I know not if I have a name. God grant you perseverance and a good end."

It was with a dark sense of impending disaster that Neri at last, obedient to a summons from Catherine, returned to Rocca d'Orcia. The longing to take up—and this time in good earnest—the hermit life had been almost irresistible. The thought of contact with his kind was as ice upon a naked nerve. But Catherine's need of his help in her public activities was too evident for him even to breathe to her his desire. Ilaria was gone—started on her southward way. Conquering with resolute self-scorn his shamed wish for silence, Neri told not only his confessor but also his spiritual mother of his surging passion and the sunset kiss. Catherine treated the matter lightly, half-relieved, it may be, to discover in her reflective and over-subtle disciple the stirring of a natural temptation. Indeed, like many moralists personally austere, she was liberal, though not lenient, toward the sins of the flesh, always claiming that it is easier to purify love than to create it, and that sins which spring from perverted feeling invade the citadel of being less than those which result from the absence of any feeling at all. But confession brought no peace to Neri. In the spiritual darkness which encompassed him, cast, it would almost seem, from the soul of Gualtiero over his own, the fire of his love for Ilaria had leapt into unsteady flame. It had, he now knew, never been extinguished, but had smouldered, evading perception in the great light that irradiated his spirit. Since his return from Avignon that light was dimmed.

The news from Gualtiero grew ever more ominous: it was hardly a surprise when word was received that the troubled life was ended. The friar had hung himself in his

chamber by his Franciscan cord. When Catherine heard, she covered her face, broke for a moment into low sobbing, and was long closeted with her confessor. "God has ordained that he who loves inordinately should be unendurable to himself," she said solemnly to Neri when she came forth: nor did she ever again allude in speech to the matter.

Neri received the tidings with outward composure; but it is probable that to the end of his days the effect was never undone. In the self-deceptions of his cousin, he had always recognised the mocking counterpart of his own. Self-distrust, blended with nobler remorse and regret, and pervaded with fevered misery, created within him a thickening gloom, in which he walked with drooped head and uncertain footsteps, yet with unfaltering resolve.

CHAPTER III

THE COMPANY OF MARY

"Dearest son in Christ sweet Jesus," wrote Catherine to Neri from Florence, whither she had been sent by the Pope almost immediately on her return from Rocca D'Orcia, "I will that thy confusion be consumed in the hope of the immeasurable love of God, that nothing remain but the true knowledge of thyself, in which thou shalt humble thee, and grow and nourish light in thy soul. Is not He more ready to pardon than we to sin? and is not He the Physician, the bearer of our iniquities? and does He not hold confusion of mind as worse than all other faults? Then, dearest son, open the eye of thy mind in the light of most holy faith, and, from beholding God's love and the ignorance and coldness of thy heart, do not fall into confusion, but let the flame of holy desire increase, and say with holy resolution, 'What I have not done before I will do now'; so thou shalt not fear lest God permit in thy case what He permitted in that other, nor shalt thou suffer because the human part of thee is separated from me. Comfort thee, and let that which Truth says abide in thy mind, that not one person shall be lost out of His hands."

It was a letter which he kept by his side during many dark days and sad, and which brought him never-failing consolation.

For life was increasingly troubled in Italy, and many a devout soul echoed the bitter cry wrung from Catherine in one of her brief moments of weakness—"The times invite us not to live, but die." The ship of the Church was rock-

ing frightfully, and little hope of future calm could visit those who watched the weather signs. Three months after Catherine's return from Rocca D'Orcia, and while she was still at Florence, Pope Gregory died. From the instant he had touched Italian soil, he had lost hold of the situation. Fatally ill, disappointed of his high hopes, baffled at every turn in his feeble efforts at reform by the sullen Sacred College, he became once more the tool of his assertive Cardinals, and dying, left a scene in which he had played for one day only a heroic part. His death left Florence still in rebellion, Tuscany still unappeased.

Turbulent sessions followed among the College of Cardinals. In concession to the violently expressed demand of the fierce Roman populace for an Italian Pope, the Archbishop of the Neapolitan province of Bari was at last reluctantly elected, and took the name of Urban VI. Neri had known the man at Avignon; the appointment could but fill him with dismay! Catherine had prayed for a reforming Pope. Well, her prayer was granted, and Christendom in consequence threatened with perils so dire that all which had gone before seemed in comparison as light as air. All over Europe the devout trembled, waited. Catherine was right: this was no time for indulging the luxury of private grief, or even of remorse for private sin. Ilaria was at Naples in the arms of Bernabo Rinaldini; Gualtiero dead. Neri turned his hurt mind and heart away, trying not to touch the open wounds. He had long ago learned outward self-control, the claims of courtesy both to God and man inhibiting in his opinion all betrayal of vehement feeling. Now he practised this art to the utmost, and moved with calm and outward faithfulness among his fellow-disciples, who had come to lean upon his quietude with little idea of what it covered. During the absence of Catherine, he became to the little Famiglia the chief stay and the most cherished friend.

Nor was his calm wholly factitious. The critical situation in public affairs stilled in a measure, to his sensitive nature, the pangs of private grief. As to that situation itself, one long accustomed to "confusion of mind," moves with a certain assurance among new cross-lights, bewildering

to the simple. This crisis, so far, offered no new test to faith—did but emphasize, indeed, a perplexity, never absent from thought since his day on Mount Ventoux. Long before that time, indeed, he had realized with horror the contrast between the Church as a political institution and the mystical Body of Christ. Could the divine life ever be expressed through a human institution? The great question—too great, he felt, for aught but life in its onward movement to solve for him—had hung poised in consciousness ever since his return. Meantime, he recognised that neutrality in such matters is a position impossible to a free agent, and held him therefore scrupulously loyal to that definite consecration of himself to the service of the Church invisible through the Church visible which had been so far, as well he knew, the most determining fact of his manhood. Less bitter in speech than of old, undaunted by distressing details in matters ecclesiastical, seeking in obedience to Catherine's constant command to direct his desires more and more to the greatest and holiest ends, he was as one who watches for the Bridegroom, but knows not in what guise he may appear.

It was above all through the constant practice of intercession that he, and with him the rest of the devout Famiglia, sought to achieve that sanctification of desire perpetually enjoined on them by their spiritual mother. The secret life of devotion which in darkest days has never died within the Christian Church, was lived at this time with especial fervour at Siena. It centred, probably, in the members of a certain confraternity known as the Company of Mary, below the Hospital. This confraternity, to which most of the friends of Catherine belonged, was in the habit of meeting before the dawn in the ancient vaults beneath the hospital of La Scala, that great edifice which spreads its gracious façade opposite the Duomo, but is in verity an entire hill-side, made over into building, tiers on tiers. Here, if tradition speak true, the confraternity had assembled for many centuries, even from the days when the Temple of Diana rose on the three marble steps from which the hospital took its name, and the persecuted Christians worshipped per-

force in these deep catacombs. The place was dear to Catherine, who when in Siena would often be present, unseen, at the offices of the confraternity; nor was there any spot in the town where her disciples could feel her nearer in spirit. Still the hush of holy lives and the memories of martyrs' deaths seemed to fill the shadowy spaces beneath the low-arching walls, where the noblest frescoes that the solemn art of Siena could paint had in the last generation added their spiritual passion to the earlier associations with which the place was full.

Neri remembered with especial distinctness in later years a Friday morning in this July. The confraternity had heard Mass, making their corporate Communion; they had then used the discipline in concert, with a serious and matter-of-course simplicity which had nothing in common with the wild excesses, then current, of the Flagellantes. It was part of their rule to do so. All around, sculptured on the lintels of the door, in the woodwork of the seats, represented in the paintings which adorned the chapel, was to be seen the sign of the Tau Cross, with the encircling cord of penance. Bodily self-discipline, like all spiritual activities, may be pursued either to a selfish or to a selfless end. Catherine's mystical teaching placed a special emphasis on the literal oneness of the Body of Christ. A persistent element in her mental life was the strange conviction—a conviction which after individualistic centuries the modern social conscience has revived—of personal responsibility for matters in which she had no personal share. From this conception chiefly sprang, at least in her later years, her ascetic practices. She had impressed it on her disciples; their pains this morning were offered, not in private penitence, but in expiation of the sins of the Church. Despite his privately expressed opinion to Ilaria, Neri had honestly shared in these exercises, to which indeed, since a certain sunset hour on Rocca D'Orcia, he had for his own sake resorted more often than of old.

After suffering, refreshment. As the faint dawn-twilight quickened in the vaults, the company betook them to the singing of a laud. A solemn song of spiritual praise it was,

set to monotonous melody—such words, such music, as would fittingly be sung in honour of a pensive Sienese Madonna, transported with still rapture and adorned with broideries of woven gold. Neri, singing with the rest, found in the music release for the moment from all that saddened or depressed. And with private reason ; the gift of song had returned to him of late, and words and music were his own composition. Even as he sang the detachment induced by the music brought power to note his surroundings; and he felt himself drawn into special love and fellowship with his companions in worship. It happened that he saw them as the foreground to a great monochrome fresco, work of a follower of the Lorenzetti, which occupied one side of the chapel. The blessed dead, past members of the confraternity, rose from their tombs, swept upward through the air—floating, flying, rushing, with wonderful unimpeded motion, stately, yet swift as thought, full of dramatic diversity, yet harmonized by one great impulse, led by a standard-bearer lifting the penitential cross and scourge, toward the throne of Christ in glory. The artist had succeeded to marvellous degree in painting disembodied souls, not fleshly men. Yet Neri, looking, saw in these painted faces, as it were, the portraits of his dear familiar friends, who, absorbed in singing, reflected the expression of that frescoed throng. He was impressed anew, and with good cause, by the nobility of that little congregation. And, indeed, it was the finest flower of Sienese manhood.

Noble sons of a noble city, these Sienese gentlemen imparted to their devotions the grave intensity and distinctive dignity characteristic of all their works. To-day, however, there had been evident during the earlier portions of their service an atmosphere of disquietude and apprehensive gloom. It lifted a little as they joined in full sweet chorus the wavering chanting of the beautiful laud, yet was ready at any moment to descend again. The silence, nevertheless, was full of refreshment and peace as the melody died softly away. Then Stefano spoke :

"I would you might all have heard that laud in Florence last month, chanted at eventide in the Duomo. Nothing so

seemed to comfort the Florentines for the absence of the Holy Office as the lauds of our brother Raniero and of Giannozzo Sacchetti, sung at vespers in the churches or processionally in the streets."

"Was it not by means of these that our holy mother succeeded in persuading the Florentines to refrain from Mass and observe the Interdict placed on the city by the holy see?" asked Gabriele Piccolomini.

Stefano assented.

"Strange times," he sighed, "when it becomes the duty of our mother Catherine to dissuade people from observing the rites of Holy Church! Cruel and bewildering times! Friends and gentlemen all, my head swims with them!"

"Be comforted, rather," interposed Neri quietly. "For that even they who deny the authority of the Bride of Christ cannot live without Her sweet comforts. Despite their contumacious rage against the Vicar of Christ, the Florentines demand the holy offices. They hunger for the spiritual food denied them by their own act."

"To see people so irreligious and religious at the same time is perplexing," remarked Ser Cristoforo di Gano plaintively.

"Perplexing, indeed," commented Father William Flete, with a twinkle—he had walked in from Lecceto as often of a Friday—"but not unusual in Tuscany. It is this union which makes your people so fascinating and baffling to an Englishman like myself."

"Tell us, Stefano; tell us, Cristoforo," broke in Sano di Maco, "of the revolt in which our mother nearly lost her life."

"I have here a copy of the letter she wrote on that matter to Fra Raimondo at Rome," said Ser Cristoforo.

"Look you, gentlemen," cried Stefano, "the sharp thing was this: It was the indiscretion, nay, the sin of our own party that roused the Ghibellines. The tumult was of the Guelph fault. I, a Guelph, I say it! Alas! one cannot fight for the right without being in the wrong these days in Italy."

"And you are just discovering that, dear my brother?" asked Neri in an undertone.

But Ser Cristoforo was speaking volubly.

"They gathered round her little house by the Porta San Giorgio—that howling Ghibelline mob—and with difficulty we persuaded her to take refuge in a garden without the walls. And the soldiery followed, drew near, rushed upon her. I saw on her face a light like that on the face of a contented child when a coveted treasure is within its grasp."

"Thus would I paint her: waiting martyrdom!" cried Vanni, the artist.

"She hastened," Ser Cristoforo went on, "she threw herself on the swords. 'I am Catherine; take me quickly; but let these others go!' she cried. Of the soldiers was not one that could touch her; and they fell back, they knelt, they sobbed in great confusion. And she, when she saw that they were gone and she was not hurt, covered her face and wept bitterly.

"She writes here," said Father William, who had been examining the letter to Fra Raimondo, "'the Eternal Bridegroom played a great joke on me.' Never spoke any one in such passionate sorrow of the loss of the martyr's crown."

"Ah, for that matter," said Master Matthew impatiently, "our holy mother is not thinking about crowns. If she longs to suffer, it is that she may help atone for the sins of this, our evil time. Each and all of her children she summons to this great work. Glad would she be might we all be blessed with the martyr's death."

"For me," confessed Stefano, "I find it hard to rejoice as she would have us when suffering comes to those I love—above all when it comes to her. Sometimes she asks of us strange things and very high."

"Aye," Neri murmured, "one learns in loving Catherine to construe all human love anew in terms of the Cross."

There was a little pause, then Gabriele spoke with a sigh: "Is it strange that Catherine welcomed the thought of death?" and gloom settled once more upon the company. "These are ungrateful days in which to devote one's self to Holy Church — hard is the service of our lords, the Popes."

Stefano, who had been seated, sprang to his feet. "Nothing shall ever make me believe that Gregory died cursing her!" he exclaimed passionately.

"Hush! Be still!" cried several stern voices. Lips were set; men avoided each other's eyes.

"We know not what a weak man may have done in the misery of his last hour," said Neri desperately, when for some moments the tension had remained unbroken. "But this we know: the Vicar of Christ obeyed her bidding. At her word he departed from Babylon and returned to the spiritual city. This you should not forget. You saw it with your eyes as I with mine."

In the silence rose the tones of Ser Cristoforo:

"What is past is gone," he said sententiously. "But, oh me, I would that our new Christ on earth were not such a terrible man!"

"He raged like a Neapolitan donkey-driver at Fra Bartolommeo, who had simply told him a necessary truth," groaned Sano de Maco.

"Let us try to believe, as our mother writes, that he really has a holy and good intention. We must learn from her a generous tolerance to human weakness. Perhaps what seems like native fierceness is but exaggerated horror of sin. We should be grateful for his hatred of luxury and worldliness," sighed Neri.

"Intentions are very well," said Messer Gabriele a little contemptuously. "But when the Archbishop of Bari berates the Lords Cardinal who appointed him till he turns purple in the face, small wonder that they throw the lie in his teeth, withdraw in dudgeon to Anagni, and meditate revenge."

"The Eternal Bridegroom," interposed the Bachellor grimly, "certainly played a joke on Catherine and Christendom when He gave us Urban for a Pope."

"At least," said Stefano, "he listens gladly to our mother—pays her the highest honours. The rumour runs in Florence that if once peace is concluded between Rome and the Tuscan league—and he is keener for such peace than ever was Gregory—he will straightway summon her to his side."

"And so we lose her again," grumbled Nigi di Doccio. "But for the matter of that, this peace for which we pine will never occur."

"How stand the negotiations between the Cardinals and Urban?" asked Master John III.

"Who knows?" replied Master Matthew. "This is sure: that anger runs high. As Catherine says, we are brittle as glass through our dissensions. Urban grows daily more harsh in rebuking, in deposing. If this goes on," he hesitated, caught his breath, resumed hurriedly:—"If this goes on the Cardinals will declare the election invalid, and appoint another Pope in his place."

When a haunting thought first reaches expression, it often turns the speaker aghast. So it was now. Nor was the Head of the House of Mercy the only man that paled.

"But that," stammered Sano di Maco. "Were schism!"

Master Matthew assented gravely.

"In comparison with this," he mourned, "all other woes that Christendom has known are but straws and shadows. But five years ago at Pisa, so Fra Raimondo has told me, Catherine predicted this very thing."

"Should this terror happen, and Holy Church be rent in twain, what are we all to do?" cried Stefano.

"Do?" returned Gabriele Piccolomini promptly. "Fight to the death like loyal knights and true for Urban VI., with all his faults, the legally appointed successor of Peter."

Brother William rose to his great height, his hair and beard touched to a gleam of silver, dreams wakened in his eyes.

"Sons mine, and friends," said he, "trouble not. The echoes of the world of strife reach not the forest lands. Insect murmurs they that perish in a day. What has the soul to do with them? In fasting and prayer, this evil world forgot, ye shall find, though six Popes instead of two should reign in Christendom—nay, though Pope there were none—that the soul could be one in celestial joy with the hosts around the Throne. Your peace no man taketh from you.——What—what is that?" For, across his words struck a loud knocking at the door.

It was Neri who opened to a fragile-looking youth in Florentine dress, bearing in his hand a spray of olive.

"Let me present me to this holy company," he said in boyish treble, "Barduccio Canigiani, brother to that Ristoro whom you know, and with him one of that dear fellowship who hail as mother the holy maid, glory of Siena, Sister Catherine Benincasa."

Stefano had sprung to welcome him with eager Tuscan embrace.

"Barduccio, dear youngest of our brothers! Let me make known—no, your news first: the olive? Our mother?"

"The olive! the olive!" called eager voices; and Barduccio, waving it above his head, cried aloud:

"Yea, the olive of peace!—peace signed and sealed between my Florence and the Holy See! Oh, little branch, twice blessed, sent first to Florence by the messengers of Pope Urban; sent now to ye faithful ones by our mother Catherine with bidding to rejoice! Here have I her own words, a letter to this goodly company. Messer Raniero, it is you, my heart tells me, who opened to me just now—receive and read!"

"Read! read!" cried all; and Neri, breaking the seal, and standing on the altar steps in the light of the tapers, read these joyous words: "Oh, dearest sons, God has heard the cries of His servants, who for so long have cried before His face, and the lamentable cry which they have raised so long over the sons who were dead. Now are they risen again; from death they have come to life, and from blindness to light. Dearest sons, the lame walk and the deaf hear; the blind eye sees and the dumb speak, crying aloud with a loud voice: 'Peace, peace, peace!' with great gladness, seeing themselves return as sons into the obedience and favour of their Father, their minds being reconciled. As people who now begin to see, they say: 'Thanks be to Thee, Lord, who hast reconciled us with our holy Father.' Now the Lamb of God, sweet Christ on earth, is called holy, while before He was called a heretic and Patarin. The cloud has passed, and fair weather is come. Rejoice, rejoice, dearest sons, with very sweet weeping for thanksgiving before the Highest Eternal Father, not calling yourselves content with this, but praying Him that soon may be raised the gonfalon of the most holy Cross. Rejoice, exult, in Christ sweet Jesus, let our hearts break, seeing the largesse of the infinite goodness of God. Now peace is made, despite him who would hinder it! Discomfited is the devil of hell! Saturday evening one olive came at one o'clock,

and to-day at vespers came the other. Love, love, love one another. I send you some of the olive of peace. Remain in the holy and sweet grace of God. Sweet Jesus, Jesus Love !"

As Neri read, men embraced each the other, weeping for gladness ; and when he had ended, many voices with one accord started once more the laud already sung, which, falling on their knees, they sang with devout thanksgiving. For the great end of the prayers and labours of years was won at last. But Neri, singing with the rest, remembered how often in his late retreat among the hills, during the period of autumn storms, he had watched in the sky a heart-rending passage of purest azure light trembling in a rift of dark vapours which none the less swept upward silently and sure, blackening the birth of day, and obscuring the glory of the world.

CHAPTER IV

AN ACT OF HUMILITY

"How ravishing is this Roman sky of May!" exclaimed Neri. "The light throbs and lives; the sighs of ages gone seem trembling in it."

"Aye, and the sighs of our own day," said Barduccio Canigiani mournfully.

Neri turned to the young Tuscan, who by his side was threading the dreary streets of the Eternal City in quest of alms for Catherine's Famiglia. Even such, he thought, must have been in aspect the boy Tarcisius, as many centuries ago he bore the Sacred Host through these same streets on his way to martyrdom.

"This is a day for triumph, not for sighs, little brother," said he.

"Aye," assented the other, but without enthusiasm. "It is doubtless very glorious that the Company of San Giorgio should have driven the wicked forces of the anti-Pope out of the city."

"To you, as to me, it is perhaps more glorious that our holy mother has persuaded Pope Urban to make his thanksgiving an act of humiliation, as we are soon to see."

Neri spoke with especial gentleness to this youngest of the Famiglia of Catherine. In Barduccio, during the five months of their stay together in Rome, he had seemed to see his own receding youth renewed.

"Aye," said the lad; but resumed, after a moment: "In times of danger, the saints are said to sigh at night in the streets of this city; Monna Semia tells me she has often

heard them of late. How far is that evening of true glory, when I brought to Siena the olive of peace! It seemed the harbinger of a reconciled Christendom; now, two Popes are at each other's throats!"

"Did we ever see the final victory of good," returned Neri, "should we not cease, think you, to long for the Celestial city?"

"No one comforts me as you do, Messer Neri," said Barduccio. "I think it is because I feel that this horrible bloodshed in the name of Christ pleases you as little as it does me."

"This battle was merciful, as battles go," said Neri. "There was no wholesale slaughter."

"No," agreed the other. "I hear that on our side Captain Alberic lost only two of his officers."

"I have a relative in his employ—Bernabo Rinaldini," said Neri. "But I know naught of his fate. Look, and give thanks for the spring that knows no strife!" he cried; for a sudden break disclosed to the friends the sorrowful but illumined Campagna.

"How gladly would I be a shepherd there!" said Neri, smiling.

"Or a hermit," suggested Barduccio, "living in one of those old towers, or under an arch of the aqueduct, and loving all the world! Did you ever feel," he added in his sweet treble, "that it was easier to love the world when one was at a certain distance from it?"

"Often," agreed Neri gravely, but with a gleam of fun in his eyes. "Especially as regards the Roman world of this present. Never have I experienced a region so unpleasant to live in. Nevertheless, little brother, you know one must stay at one's post."

"Oh, yes!" replied the boy eagerly. "Even if one were a hermit one would have to come to the Holy City now to defend the sweet Bride of Christ and His Vicar. As our mother wrote Father William Flete, this is no time to stay in one's wood. I should never refuse to come, like Father William and Brother Anthony."

"I trust and pray not," said Neri sternly. "Would you

like to receive such a letter as our mother wrote those eremites when they refused to leave their cells?"

"I would not like to grieve her so," said Barduccio. "Ah! it seems that all men grieve her! Her great heart is one pang!"

"Great love is ever measured by great pain," the elder disciple replied.

"Is there any whom she does not love in this wide world?" the boy wondered. "Is there any through whom she does not suffer? Even over those she has never seen her deep affections yearn, as over that evil Queen, Madama Giovanna of Naples."

Neri sighed, and was silent.

"May I ask you a question, Messer Raniero?" asked Barduccio, looking troubled. "This spiritual father of our dear mother—Fra Raimondo: he is doubtless a very holy man?"

"A man of holy desires," said Neri, "and of true ardour for evangelic poverty."

"How, then, could he turn aside through fear from the mission laid on him by Pope Urban to go to the King of France? What if the Clementines were watching the seas to prevent him!" cried Barduccio. "When our Mother received his letter of excuse, saying that he had not sailed, I thought her heart would break. I wrote him at her dictation a letter that, were I he, I could not survive, such disappointed love spoke through it! She told him all her mind. She said"—and Barduccio looked at Neri awestruck—"she said that if he could not have gone on his feet he should have crawled!"

Neri laughed, but with a catch in his breath.

"Judge not Fra Raimondo," he said sadly. "It is with our holy mother at this moment as with the Bride of Christ herself; she is wounded in the house of her friends. Her foes are those of her own household. It is not for us to question nor to blame those who fall away in this dread hour of test and darkness. They have been many; they may be many more. Ours only to watch and pray that we—that you and I—fail her never by thought, or word, or deed."

His voice had grown very solemn.

"Oh, pray for me, Messer Neri!" cried Barduccio. "Pray that I fail not! I am but as a child before you. You—you could never fail!"

"Ah, me!" sighed Neri in his heart.

They had reached the door of Catherine's house in the Rione di Colonna. Neri put the bag of bread which he bore into Barduccio's hands.

"Go you within," he said, with difficult voice. "I will meet you all presently at the procession."

Relieved of his burden, he strode through the streets alone in his habit of Brother of Mercy, which he wore when on quest. The words of Barduccio were stinging in his ears. Not fail? Alas! When every day, and chiefly every night, he was so conscious of failure! Ever since he had reached Rome in the train of Catherine, depression, his old enemy, had held him in a prison-house of shadows. The immemorial sadness of the very air in the Eternal City penetrated as it seemed to the inmost recesses of his brain and mind. Day by day he struggled through the tasks assigned him by Catherine; he wrote at her dictation letters of convincing argument and passionate appeal to the potentates of Europe, whom she would fain have preserved from the curse of the schismatic; accompanied her to those audiences with Pope Urban in which, never cowed, never irritated, she strove with all her authoritative humility and womanly charm to mitigate the furious impulses that made him as a man possessed; watched with reverent compassion and amazed respect the agony of her great heart, the unswerving energy of her great mind; and prayed by her side in the sad old churches where her brief hours of refreshment were spent. They were strenuous days; he moved through them drearily, as through crowding phantoms, struggling to suppress an imperious craving that tormented him for release, for joy, for a poet's world of images gay and fair. But ever by night sleep brought one persistent vision—a reach of laughing waters, now turquoise, now sapphire, now upheaving into a mighty green translucent wave, that curled swiftly toward him; and wavering within, the face of Ilaria,

smiling, quivering, toward his own. The lovely dream was set in dark forebodings; he woke from it, ever trembling, in sweat, sure that the crisis of his fate drew near. In waking hours he hated the name of Naples; he shrank from the time of sleep. Fidelity! Fidelity! It should be exorcized, this longing for escape from the intolerable strain of sharing Catherine's great agony, this demand for a harmony which his better nature knew to be false. Better the grim, grey, violent life of Rome, the desperate defence of an uninspiring cause.

Uninspiring, indeed! He had reached, as in duty bound, the space before the little Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, where the first Thanksgiving Mass was to be said. A very unvictorious victory, he mused sadly, this triumph won by the mercenary freebooters whom the Vicar of Christ was paying to fight against the armies of Clement. Yet, on the whole, it was good, he admitted, to have repulsed these armies. There was no doubt that legal right was on the side of Urban, and however difficult it might be to feel enthusiasm for this man as head of Christendom, the other was far worse. To hail as Vicar of Christ that ruthless, if fascinating, evil-liver, Count Robert of Geneva, would be a more impossible thing than had yet been known. The triumph of the Italian party in the election had at least meant the victory of honest popular feeling over French refinement, aristocratic diplomacy, and worldly culture. The Roman populace was thronging now into the little square. It was a coarse, wild crowd, very unlike the crowds at Avignon, where every other man was cleric or gentle. Small wonder, thought Neri, that this mob had intimidated the Sacred College and forced them to renounce the election of a Frenchman in favour of an Italian.

Catherine now appearing from a side street, he hastened to join her. She was accompanied by members of her Famiglia to the number of about thirty, yet, in the absence of Fra Raimondo and Stefano Maconi seemed, as it were, alone. Beside her moved old Monna Lapa, arrayed incongruously in the habit of a Sister of Penance, which she had assumed in desperation as the easiest way of keeping near her beloved

but incomprehensible daughter. But the religious life had compensating excitements, as now, when the rude crowd made respectful way with murmurs of admiration. For Catherine, known to stand high in the counsels of the Pope, was just now well regarded, it being commonly said that her prayers had secured Alberic his victory. Lapa bore herself proudly, as befitted the mother of a personage. Catherine, by her side, leaned heavily upon the arm of Barduccio. At a glance one would have given her fifty years instead of thirty-two.

The procession now issuing from the little church was less sumptuous than those organized at Avignon—a trifle shabby if truth were told. But it was beautiful in the eyes of the Famiglia. For in the midst walked that thick-set, swarthy Neapolitan of choleric aspect, Pope Urban VI. — walked gingerly, curling bare toes around the cobble-stones, and devoutly suppressing a wry face now and then as his soles met an unusually sharp pebble.

"Our Holy Father will go thus barefoot even to St. Peter's," Catherine announced to the bystanders. "It is a noble sight, is it not, Neri?" she added in a lower tone—a shade of anxiety, almost of timidity, in her manner as she appealed to him.

"It is indeed," he assented, mustering a fair show of enthusiasm. "It is a spectacle that well rebukes by its suggestion the vain pomp and show of worldly prelates. As they are saying in the crowd, Urban is the first Pope since Pope Stephen, in the eighth century, to proceed through the Roman streets in this wise."

Catherine turned on him swiftly, with a slight trace of her old impatience.

"Why answer me thus?" she said. "Do I not see thy mind? Thou art feeling bitter shame that this humility is but a show, belied by the character and acts of him who shows it?"

"Do I not well to hide such thoughts beneath the veil of seemly speech?" asked Neri, arching his eyebrows. He refrained from adding that yet more bitter to him was the fact that this parade of meekness celebrated a triumph of brute force.

Catherine's eyes had filled with troubled tears. "Thou shouldest have faith," she sighed, "that the high and holy Lord God can shape in His own image the soul of each of his creatures—of Pope Urban, of thee, and me."

"I live by naught but faith," Neri replied, sighing also. As so often since Avignon days he was conscious of the estranging sea that separates the tenderest human loves.

A soldier swaggered through the crowd and touched him on the shoulder. Neri looked at him vaguely—something familiar teazed him in the man's face.

"Messer Raniero," said the man, "I am sent to bring you to one who is dying."

Neri, with the custom of his confraternity, turned instantly to go, but the man lingered awkwardly.

"Is this the Sister Catherine whose prayers they say have won the day?" he asked, speaking the dialect of Siena.

"If you are of the Company of San Giorgio, I did indeed pray ardently for a blessing on your arms," Catherine replied, looking kindly at him.

"I beg, then, send your blessing to my master," said the soldier with rough respect. "He is a Captain of Count Alberic, and was mortally wounded in the assault on the Castle of St. Angelo."

Catherine hesitated a moment, but Monna Lapa, by her side, pulled her skirts. "Quick, quick! before the poor man die!" she urged. "A soldier, who has laid down his life for our Babbo Pope Urban! Make the blessing good and strong, my daughter."

Catherine raised her hand solemnly:

"'May the blessing of Almighty God rest on this knight of the true faith," she said. "'May his soul depart into the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 'May the fires of purgatory be swiftly over, and may he soon join the armies of heaven.' Carry this blessing, Neri, my son, to the soldier of Christ and of our lord the Pope," she added—and Neri, though scene and commission were distasteful to him, bowed in grave assent.

CHAPTER V

AN EDIFYING END

A SOLDIER and a Brother of Mercy were no uncommon sight in the streets of Rome.

"Who is your master?" asked Neri, as the two walked swiftly in the direction of the Colosseum. But he knew the answer before the man replied—had known it while Catherine was pronouncing her solemn blessing.

"Bernabo Rinaldini," said the soldier gruffly.

"Is there no hope?"

The man shook his head, his face working; even Bernabo, it seemed, had at least the gift to attach his dependents to his person.

"The weapon is in the wound," he said. "When it is removed, he will die. He is in fearsome pain, but will not have the weapon touched till he be assured of his soul's salvation. He is very anxious about that matter."

Bernabo anxious about his soul! The idea touched Neri with a grim humour. Strange thoughts pressed, were driven back, as they hastened through the lonely streets. Though it were noonday, though his body waked, the bright vision of the night shone suddenly before his eyes, alluring, beckoning, vanishing.

"But Padre Ettore is very good," the soldier was saying. "He will get a poor soldier to heaven if anyone can. We men-at-arms all seek his services."

The vision vanished for good in the chamber of death. No other image could hold its own before the face of Bernabo. Of beauty not a trace remained. The brow

already damp with death-sweat was the home of fear; the unshaven lips were drawn back from the teeth, giving the countenance a sinister aspect. The eyes not only glared, but searched.

A scared-looking priest was in the room. He hailed Neri with relief.

"Thank God you are come, messere!" he exclaimed. "I am summoned to hear the confession; but the patient will not make it till he have seen you; and the moments of life fleet fast. Yes, yes, Messer Capitano, I withdraw"—for the awful eyes had turned in his direction, and the lips had uttered a sound.

Bernabo turned painfully to Neri; satisfaction, anxiety, and something else were in the face.

"Good news, my master," said the soldier soothingly. "Messere brings you the blessing of Sister Catherine; every prayer of hers, so they say, unlocks a little door in Madonna's heart. You can die very quietly with that blessing."

"Give it to me!" murmured Bernabo greedily.

Neri did not at once comply. He was looking at the wounded man, pity and horror, repugnance and tenderness at war in his face.

"Give me that blessing! Give it at once!"

Bernabo had found his voice—harsh, imperious in all its weakness.

Neri could not refuse to execute his commission. He repeated the blessing slowly, and the face of Bernabo expressed satisfaction.

"That ought to be strong," croaked the wounded man. "Of course, I have always known that the Benincasa was a saint. A saint's blessing must have great power even before she dies, must it not? You know about such things."

He spoke with effort, yet with more force than would have been supposed possible.

"It is the blessing of a holy woman," Neri replied; "but it will be of no avail if one dies impenitent."

"Well, I shall not die impenitent," returned Bernabo, with a curious look. "Padre Ettore will hear my confession in a few moments. It shall be thorough and honest. You

have the indulgence of Urban?" he asked the soldier, who nodded reassuringly.

"Padre Ettore has it safe and sound," said the man. "He will give it at the proper time. But that is for all the soldiers. Sister Catherine's is stronger. It is for you alone, you alone."

"And the last absolution—and the Host—and—the—oil," counted Bernabo hoarsely. "They make a good showing. Fine luck, Maffeo, to be caught fighting, if caught one must be, on the side of the holy Father. If he only be really the holy Father! Do you think he is?" he asked, rolling his eyes at Neri.

"Oh, about that," returned the other, "you may be quite at ease. Urban is truly and surely the real Pope."

"Good! I thought so; 'twas one reason I joined Alberie after Cesena," groaned Bernabo. Terror flared up in the face for a moment, then faded again. "One makes one's little precautions," said he. "Leave us, Maffeo. And now," he continued significantly when they were alone, "to thee and me."

White hate blazed suddenly in the eyes, then was quenched beneath the light of cunning.

"Bernabo, my cousin, for the sake of Him who died on the Cross," cried Neri, not noting the man's departure. "Trust not in vanities like these!"

"Are you a heretic?" queried Bernabo in surprise.

"Vanities!" pursued the other. "Indulgence, blessing, absolution, the most holy Host itself, save as helps to faith in the love that cannot fail, that hears the whisper of dying lips, however sinful!" He paused. It was difficult to speak to Bernabo of the love of God.

"I die—a faithful son—in defence of Holy Church," said Bernabo. "I have never questioned one of her doctrines. Apparently you are more of a heretic than I."

"It may well be," said Neri.

The other eyed him coolly, and a silence fell. In the heart of it grew and deepened a significance. At last Bernabo spoke:

"Of all men living, I have hated thee the worst."

He was rolling his eyes fearfully; the face was on guard.

"Yet did I never injure you," sighed Neri. "Oh, my brother, for whom Christ died, put that hate aside. Look within my heart. Naught is there toward you but compassion."

"Looking in—thy heart, I find—the image—of my wife, Ilaria. As ever—looking in her heart—I find—thine own."

Bernabo hissed the words; the dilated, glaring eyes were as a weapon to pierce the heart of which he spoke.

"It is true!" Neri cried with bitter shame. "Yet if those dying eyes can see, they behold within my breast also the image of one very pure, before whom all my thoughts do worship, save rebels still unconquered. Oh, in this awful hour hate no more! Let us poor souls, comrades in sin and shame, cry out together on the Divine Compassion."

And, falling on his knees, he began to chant with passionate appeal: *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine: Domine, exaudi vocem meam.*

Listening on the stair without, soldier and priest nodded to each other at the sound. All was going suitably in the death-chamber.

Bernabo listened, still with that watchful look. Spasms of horrible pain passed over his face.

"Do you still hate me?" asked Neri anxiously, when the psalm was over. It was painful to him to think that his shadow stood between this man and penitence.

"A little," replied Bernabo, still with that curious smile. "But I am almost sure that I shall hate you less—in a moment. Do you remember," he asked suddenly, "that I attempted your life at Bologna?"

Neri signed assent.

"Do you forgive me?" asked Bernabo, with some anxiety.

"With all my heart, with all my soul!" exclaimed the other eagerly. The question seemed to him the first real sign of moral life the dying man had shown. "God be my witness!"

"Come then hither," cried the other. Craving was in his tones and eyes. "Make on my forehead and on my breast, in token of your forgiveness, the sign of the holy cross."

He closed his eyes; his lips moved as in prayer. One hand stirred beneath the bed-clothes.

Neri, over-joyed, sprang to his side.

"May the Eternal God forgive thee, freely, gladly, as I forgive!" he cried; and stooping, began solemnly to trace the sign.

Concentrated hate, loosed from its leash, snarled, shone in Bernabo's face. Neri saw nothing. A lifted hand—a glittering flash: the knife struck fierce and deep. But the hand that guided it trembled; it missed the heart. Neri, with a cry in which grief was as strong as pain, staggered and fell backward.

"Gr-r-r-h!" snarled Bernabo, like a great cat growling over its prey.

At the sound of the fall, the two waiting without had rushed in.

"Now, holy father," whispered Bernabo grimly, "you may hear my confession. And you would best be quick about it."

* * * * *

Neri, a few hours later, lay in an adjoining room, faint from loss of blood, but recovered from his long unconsciousness. Agonized pity for the soul of Bernabo filled his being, and was pouring itself out in broken prayer, when the little priest entered. His chin was trembling.

"All is over, messere," he said.

"Alas! alas! It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!" moaned Neri.

"Doubtless," said the priest. "Yet Messer the Capitano was exceedingly well fortified. Also, he died fighting for Christ; and I gave him absolution at the end. We may have hope for him, I think."

"You gave him absolution?" cried Neri incredulously.

"What would you have?" inquired the priest plaintively. "See, messere, he made a full confession. A fearful tale, but not worse than we confessors of soldiers are often called

to hear. The last crime was the assault upon your person. 'And now,' he said, when he had done, 'absolve me swiftly.' But I was true to my holy profession, messere. I told him that I doubted the sincerity of his penitence, especially on the last point. He laughed, an awful laugh; he was by that time very low. 'Is my cousin dead?' he murmured. I told him, No, that by the grace of God you would recover. 'In that case,' he answered, 'I assure you, on the honour of a soldier, that I repent the blow.' What could I do? The time was so short, the responsibility so fearful of sending into eternity a soul unhouselled! I gave him absolution. I gave him the blessing of Urban. I placed the Food of immortality between his lips. As soon as It rested there, he rose in bed; he lifted his hand, and pulled the weapon from his wound. 'We will allow no time for new sinning,' he cried in agony. The blood gushed forth in a stream. Bending over, I caught his last whisper: 'Jesus!' he sighed, and 'Catherine!' The soul flickered, and was gone. Surely, messere, we may have faith that one, making such appeal in his last moment, may not perish everlastingly!"

"I know not. I know not," moaned Neri. "I fear me that the soul had perished even before the body died!"

"And I," said the little priest severely, "fear that you show an unforgiving spirit. 'Tis true, you have much provocation thereto. May I not hear your confession, my son? Will you not unburden your soul?"

But Neri, with a sorrowful smile, declined his offices.

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So Bernabo had made an edifying end! Neri lay in his weakness several days before he could be removed. Would anything, he wondered at first, ever banish the horrible memories of that dying face? Yes, the vision, brighter than ever before, of laughing waters. Ilaria widowed! Ilaria free! He recalled that old barrier, the cousinhood, which even in early youth had shut away from him all thought of nearer bond. And were it not for this? Nay, he knew with sad self-knowledge that she drew him ever down and down, far from those levels whereon alone his soul could breathe. Yet ah! the shining waters! Ah! the lovely, imploring face!

CHAPTER VI

PARTING

Alessia met Neri at the door as he returned four months later from the quest of alms.

"Lucky the bag is full," she said affectionately. "Four new friends have arrived unannounced from Umbria—old men two of them, Catherine's hermits—expecting lodging and food. I was glad, for the news and my anxiety made her smile a little. She wishes to see you, Neri. You are to go up at once."

Catherine, emaciated and feeble, lay on a pallet bed. A table, on which stood a cross made from the holy beech of Vallombrosa, and a case of relics, stood by her side. Neri knelt and kissed the thin large hand. She looked at him with that light of love made manifest, which, from the hour when first he saw it by Fontebranda in the plague stricken street, had been his guiding star. Mystery had deepened about her since those days. As she moved, forceful and alert, through the turbulent world of Roman politics, it was evident to all that outward matters were but signs of the true drama wherein her part was played. To whoso walked beside her, the thinnest of veils separated seen and unseen. The folds stirred in a windless air, and from the thither side were breathed strange messages. Yet Catherine's sweet human charm was never greater. Through the awe-inspiring pain of these last months of her earthly life, still shone that joyousness of nature which had made the neighbours re-christen her as a child with the name, Euphrosyne. Her look, as she bent it on her disciple, had the old power to penetrate and transform.

"Is all well with you, my mother?" he asked.

"All is well, for all is as God wills," she made answer, smiling. "Concerning many things that befall us in these days, it is best to keep silence."

"Of a surety; but I was thinking of your bodily state," he answered.

"I suffer much," she said peacefully, "nor can I always tell the pains of the body from those of the spirit. Often I think that I shall not be with you long on earth."

"Ah, say not so! I think it not!" he mourned; and, indeed, so used was he to see her ill and weak, so slowly had the great change come, that he had at this time no special sense of alarm.

It was not on the walls of the room that her eyes rested.

"I believe," she said, in words which he was to remember, "that after my bodily death I shall be nearer you than ever before. When I bade farewell to the father of my soul at Ventimiglia," she continued with touching gravity, "I knew that I should not see his face again."

"Father Raimondo is only at Genoa," Neri blundered. "He can return, if summoned, at any moment."

A spasm passed over her face.

"To see him—his mission unfulfilled—would be but to suffer afresh," said she.

"He failed, yet is he true at heart," said Neri, longing to comfort her. "Bodily courage was never one of his gifts, as he in his humility is well aware. Not all good Christians have zeal for martyrdom. Are you not ever reminding us how in our Father's house are many mansions?"

He was rewarded by a wan smile.

"It is true," said Catherine submissively, "and it has been joy to me to find that I love that dear father since his failure more than ever before—as the mother loves the babe, whom she seeks for his own sake to feed with bitter, that he may turn to the nourishment of men. But it seems that all fail in this time of trial. In whom shall the Church trust, save in the servants of God, who have renounced the world? Had they but come as I bade them at the call of Urban, truth might yet have prevailed. How should

men resist the united witness of holiness to the claims of Christ on earth? But the hermits of Lecceto refused the Pope and me! Father William wrote, preferring to remain in his peace!" Her scorn was very still. "The Abbot of St. Antimo has turned craven," she sighed, "and there are others. The greatest of all, the Vicars of Christ! Our holy Father, Urban——"

She did not finish her sentence. Neri knew well what lay in the silence, for ever since his election the Archbishop of Bari had steadily degenerated. What might once have been construed as devout, if over-wrought, austerity, could now only be understood as an evil temper; the zeal for reform manifested itself solely as autocratic and obstinate self-will.

"Messer Dante saw many Popes in hell," he ventured. "Yet did he attain at the last to the vision of the White Rose, even of the Church Triumphant." But Catherine did not heed him.

"They fall away," she moaned. "They fall away on every side. Soon there will be not one left."

He stood gazing down at her mournfully. "Not one, my mother?" he asked, his voice trembling.

She raised her eyes on him. In their depths he saw trust, but, alas! he saw doubt also. He covered his face.

Presently he heard her speaking with such vibration of pain in the tones as he had never caught before.

"My sins!" she was saying, as to herself. "My sins are the cause of all. If I were perfectly aglow with the fire of the Divine love, I should pray the Lord so ardently that He, who is all-merciful, would cause all to be kindled by the fire that should burn in me. But I see the Christian religion lying as a dead man, and I neither mourn nor weep over him."

He had never seen her in such a moment of entire weakness. It was known in the Famiglia that she was subject to storms of spiritual uncertainty and anguish—contests, as their phrase had it, of demons against her soul. But the revelation of these was reserved for her confessor—never, probably, before the defection of Fra Raimondo would she have betrayed them to a lay disciple. Her piteous eyes, her tight-set lips, stirred all his manhood with the longing to console.

"My mother," said he firmly, seating himself and laying his hand on hers. "Think not thus. The battle is not lost. If France be false, is not far England true? Has not the King of Hungary yielded to your representations? Are not your letters holding men unnumbered loyal to Urban? He himself shows him docile to your control! Who but you could have reconciled him to these turbulent Romans?"

Her face, as he was speaking, cleared a little doubtfully, then clouded again.

"My son beloved," she said. "Tell me true. Though at times of late years there is a veil between us, I know that thou understandest me without many words. Tell me—even if all thou sayest be so—is my consolation therein pure? Is it indeed for the Sweet Bride of Christ that I labour, and not"—the whisper broke off, began again—"in night-watches I hear that devil-voice that spoke at Rocca d'Orcia. 'Vainglory all!' it says. 'Vainglory, and passion for power!'"

"Dismiss it from your mind"—Neri was speaking with all the concentrated energy of which he was master. "It is foul lies. I, who doubt many things, doubt at times this solid earth, at others, the heavens above us—never for one moment during the intimacy of years have doubted you. You have died to self; restored, you move among us as one that serveth."

"My sins, my sins!" moaned Catherine. "Yet in truth I think it is a spirit of lies that so torments me. One thing I know"—and now her usual impersonal fervour possessed her—"I would not die till I have won from the foul fiend the soul of Giovanna, of Naples."

"He certainly seems to have regained his clutch on it—if ever he let it go." Neri, in spite of himself, was sardonic.

Catherine sighed. "From my youth I have loved her and yearned over her," said she. "I divine in her a strong nature. They who sin greatly are great when they repent. But she is very cruel to herself."

"In the management of her kingdom," said Neri, "I conceive her to be a wise and great princess—no unworthy grand-daughter to King Robert. But in matters religious, my mother, you must surely see that her abrupt changes in

allegiance from Clement to Urban and back again, spring from a mind indifferent to truth, swayed only by caprice or policy."

"She answered my letters of pleading," urged Catherine. "She renounced the anti-Pope, and sent ambassadors to Urban. Though now she has recalled those ambassadors I will not despair."

"She sent them to pacify her people, rebelling in favour of the Neapolitan Pope. She recalled them when the mutiny was quelled," said Neri, unrelenting. Then, seeing her sorrowful face, remorse seized him. Why intrude the worldly interpretation on this high suffering?

"Yet surely," he continued with more softness, "it is not for me to read her heart. I pray you may be right. I sincerely think that she who has once changed sides—in the eyes of Europe, too—may change again."

"Could I but see her face to face, I believe I should win her!" Catherine grieved. "Had they but let me go to Naples as I wished!—But my Father Raimondo and Christ on earth would not permit."

"I think me they judged wisely," said Neri. "The court of Naples is no place for a holy woman, or for any other," he added, sighing.

"If Agnes, Margaret, and other holy virgins had made these reasonings," said Catherine with spirit, "they would never have obtained the crown of martyrdom. It was want of faith, not prudence, that forbade my going." She spoke without bitterness, but with deep regret. "But it is concerning Naples that I sent to consult thee, my son," she continued.

Neri's heart sank.

"It may be that I shall still compass the journey," she said; "but I know not. Thou sayest justly that Giovanna may yet repent. I need during the next few months someone in residence at the Court, who shall steadily press the true cause on Madama the Queen, and shall also keep me informed of the situation. It is a dangerous post. Urban, beloved of the people, is hated by the court. Poison, the dagger—imprisonment at least—may wait my messenger.

He who goes there for the sake of the Sweet Bride may be called to shed his blood. I give thee this mark of my trust, my son. At Avignon, though thou didst not all I had hoped, yet wert thou of true service. I appoint thee to this high honour."

"To Naples!" Neri's face, pallid from his late wound, flushed rosy-red; he started from his seat, clasping his hands. "Ask me not that," he cried. "Not that, my mother!"

Catherine gazed at him with surprised eyes.

"Thy wound is healed," said she.

"Go thither I will not!" he cried vehemently.

She sprang to her feet, tottered, but would have none of his help.

"You refuse?" she exclaimed.

He had turned very white, very stern.

"I dare not go," he said.

"You—dare—not?" repeated Catherine.

"I have a vision," he said desperately. Her disapproval always drove him into helplessness of speech. "Night by night, I see a green wave, curling toward me horribly. If I go to Naples it will reach me, it will break——"

"He has had a vision; he dares not." Catherine's scorn was low-voiced and slow. "He dares not!—Oh, most Holy God Eternal, how often am I to hear that word?—Not thus would have spoken my son Stefano!"

Neri stood with his head bowed, in silence.

"One man fears the galleys of the King of France," said she; "and one, the turbulence of Roman streets. And one, having had a vision of great waters, thinks perchance that he may drown!"

Neri by this time had turned proud.

"Aye," said he in a steady voice. "Drown in those deep waters that go even over the soul."

"Oh, sweet Bride of Christ!" cried Catherine, raising her arms to Heaven. "Behold, said I not truth, that all men abandon thee, and of thy children there is none left?" As she gazed upward the recognition of somewhat unseen dawned with a great light in her face. "Descend from above!" she cried. "Descend, oh Ship of the Church!

Rest upon these my shoulders! In the strength of God, they shall not fail!" Her eyes watched; her arms were lifted as if expecting a heavy weight. Then, with the motions of one in whom such expectation had been fulfilled, she sank to her knees, her shoulders bowed. Her aspect was as one all but crushed under a great burden, yet supporting it resolutely.

Neri, after standing a few moments, his spirit torn within him, went to her, and forced her gently to her feet. He had won a victory over his pride.

"My mother!" he said. "Reflect! You will know that I fear no bodily ill. The poison of the Clementines, the red-hot pincers with which they tear off the flesh of Urbanites in the streets, the prisons of Giovanna have no terrors for me. Nay, a prison were not unwelcome," he smiled a little. "It were a form, good as another, of that hermit cell for which I ever long. Yet by all the trust which I have not deserved, I beg you trust me now. In the name of Him who bade us pray, 'lead us not into temptation,' send me not to Naples!"

She looked at him with seeking eyes, loving, but clouded still.

"Art thou perhaps troubled in thy mind concerning the cause of Urban our Holy Father?" she asked.

"Oh, I have no doubt whatever concerning the validity of the election," he said, passing his hand across his brow.

"But I cannot go! I will not! I dare not!" he repeated.

"My son," said Catherine; "I perceive that these perils which daunt thee are of the spirit, not of the body. Nevertheless, to shrink from them were to play a craven part. Here is the test of thy life. Yield not to those phantom fears that ever beset thee! In the power of the Cross, overcome thy confusion of mind!"

In effect, terror, sharper than he had ever known, was bewildering and blinding him. Beside the face of his spiritual mother wavered and shone, with almost equal distinctness, the face of Ilaria. He was conscious of Catherine's will, acting with all its might upon his own.

"I dare not, in the name of Christ!" he repeated, and felt her will relax. "Bid me not to leave your side."

"Ever the same cry from you all," she said wearily. "Dependence on me when you should depend on God alone. I am very weak. You must do as you will. Bid Alessia come to me." And she sank back upon her pallet.

* * * * *

An hour later Neri sought her once more.

"I will go," he said, very white. "Fear glares around me and within. But I will go."

"Think you I know no fears?" murmured Catherine kindly, yet still with a little touch of scorn. "But behind the fears there is peace; for the Church gives life, and she has in herself such life that no man can slay her, and none whom God hath given her shall be snatched out of her hands."

"Forgive me that I have grieved you," said Neri humbly.

"Gladly," she answered him in all tenderness, though yet a little wistful. "Concerning thee and Fra Raimondo, and Father William and the others, I am well content; for I perceive that nothing happens without mystery.

And, however unpalatable was the classification to his soul, he could but bow in silence.

"I am a poor weakling," he said to her; "yet have I sought to be obedient. And now, your blessing."

But she shook her head, looking at him as one in a dream.

"I will indeed give thee my blessing; but it shall not be now," she said.

When he sought her next, on the eve of departure, she was unable to see him, being very ill with an attack to which she was subject of pain in the breast. He would fain have lingered; but learning that she had asked with eagerness if he had gone, he set forth at once on his journey to Naples—worse off, he reflected sorrowfully, than Bernabo Rinaldini, who had gone into the other world with that blessing which had been denied to him.

CHAPTER VII

AN INTERLUDE

Naples once reached, and his life there quietly ordered, Neri's forebodings seemed uncalled for. He was watchfully absorbed in the duties of the day; if they were set in a glory of sea and sky, of sweet laughter and bright wit, that surely was no crime! For the duties themselves were no sinecure. The situation was acute: a Clementine court, an Urbanite populace; Charles of Durazzo, the adopted heir of the Queen, and her nephew by marriage, rallying arms on behalf of Urban, while his wife Margaret remained at Naples, half as hostage, half as Princess-royal; the succession in dispute; excommunication hanging black over the head of Giovanna. That diplomatic instinct with which de Frontaigne had credited Neri, came fully into play. The Abbot Lisolo, his comrade, was a staunch hot-headed gentleman with a capacity for quarrels; Neri had constantly to counteract his blunders. The negotiations with Giovanna, who had a temper of her own, were soon left entirely to him.

The elderly Queen, with her ruined but still dignified beauty, was suave in bearing toward him. She listened respectfully, though with a face of wood, concealing now and then a yawn, to the stinging and masterly letters which Catherine despatched; expressed herself as open to a change of view; sent smooth messages, and summoned Neri again and again to her side to hear from his lips arguments with which she was already perfectly familiar. For some time he was happy in being able to write Catherine favourable reports. But he was too much a man of the world to be wholly

deceived ; it was evident, on casual knowledge of Giovanna that, as he had surmised, her choice of party would not be determined by those motives to which Catherine appealed. Personal modesty prevented him, however, from surmising that the woman dallied with him from a double reason—first, indeed, to gain time in which to rally secretly a force for the aid of Clement, but in no small part because, even in advanced life, she retained her love of strangers and her weakness for a pretty fellow.

Meantime, the atmosphere of this secular court was not distasteful. Neri preferred it to that of Avignon, where churchly forms seemed at perpetual war with that unscrupulous play and counterplay of diplomatic weapons by which public affairs were apparently always decided. Giovanna's Court had an evil repute, but Neri, once avoiding the popular gladiatorial combats, found little to shock him, much to refresh, after the crude passions he had witnessed at Rome. The truth was, that in his presence vulgarity retreated behind its mask. That love of poetry and the arts, which had made Naples in the twelfth century the literary centre of Europe, still lingered, and Neri found pleasant intercourse on lines in which he had long been lonely. Youthful associations were renewed in another way also. Giovanna, in her way a reforming queen, inherited the devotion to lawyers of her grandfather, and the ablest men in that profession in Europe were to be met at her court.

Neri was delighted, among agreeable new acquaintances, to meet an old comrade, none other than Andrea Vanni, the painter of Siena, employed by royal commission in adorning the churches. Vanni, like himself, was quite alive to the charm of the place ; but Neri had more access than the painter to Court circles. His position as Catherine's emissary was not lacking in distinction ; and here, as elsewhere, he soon made his way on his own merits. The discovery was made that he could take a joke or cap a verse ; from the Queen to the youngest maid of honour, the ladies voted that he had a captivating smile.

Of Ilaria he saw little. In her shadowy mourning she carried herself with a strange new dignity, and seemed to

avoid him even more sedulously than he had planned to avoid her. He heard her spoken of as among the chief Court beauties. Giovanna, it was said, had shown her marks of very special favour, the more noteworthy, as her husband had died in the pay of Charles of Durazzo, fighting against Clement; but his only opportunity for seeing her was at the Court functions which it was his duty to attend. To men of Neri's temperament, the absent has a more constraining force than the present; the dream-Ilaria, with her wavering smile, had borne, it would seem, more intimate relation to his life than this woman whom he watched from afar. He was set free to consider her beauty; judging impersonally, as a stranger, he found it surpassingly great. Ilaria had come to her own, as never in her earlier youth. Like all great beauty, hers was serious. It had acquired a touch of majesty and of mystery, a depth and intensity of significance, that seemed to him something new in the history of the race.

One brief talk, and one only, he had with her alone. The message reached him, shortly after his arrival, that the Countess Rinaldini, understanding that he had been with her late husband during his last hours, desired his attendance at her side. If a diplomat, fortified with all the formalities, obeyed the summons, he found a lady who could play at the same game. Ilaria, who received him in the presence of a waiting-woman, bore herself with hauteur and widowed sadness. If in the past he had ever been inclined to think of his cousin as a light nature, the thought vanished; no frivolous spirit hid beneath that pallid state.

She had received, it seemed, no particulars about her husband's last hours. Could Neri supply them? He did so, with discretion.

"I found a priest with him," said he, "who assured me when all was over—for I was not myself beside him at the last—that he had made an edifying end. I can testify that he took comfort in the thought that he died fighting for the Vicar of Christ, and that he eagerly sought the last Sacraments and the blessing of the servants of God."

Ilaria bowed her shapely head, not a flicker escaping beneath her downcast lids.

"All this is naturally consoling for me to hear," she said. "May I ask for what special reason he summoned you?"

"He wished," replied Neri sedately, "to ask my forgiveness for a certain passage between us, in which, so he said, he had tried to injure me several years ago."

From under the lids Ilaria scrutinized him keenly; he bore the look unabashed.

"It is well," she said at last, with a sigh, as one relieved. "Did he speak of me?"

"He gave me no message," said Neri. "But he mentioned your name, and in such wise that you have no cause to doubt his love."

"I have never doubted it," she said, sighing heavily. "My husband was ever to me a lover true."

Incredible as it seemed, she appeared to regret Bernabo. She bowed dismissal, and Neri left her presence with due ceremony, glad that the scene was over, but sad at heart. He had no further private intercourse with her, and assured himself constantly that he was grateful for the fact.

He was living, not at the Court, but in a country lodging that took his fancy close by the shore of the bay. Day and night, in the intervals of business, he gazed over its enchanting waters, now strewn as with apple-blossoms over sapphire in the morning light, now opal-faint, and, like an opal, flashing with gorgeous hints of flame, in the quieter hours toward evening. And as his eyes drank deep of beauty, the rest so craved steeped him in calm. The beating of the surf against the sea wall before his door released his ears from their tense attention to that clamorous roar of conflict in far Rome. The curves of the coast, the islands that stretched shadows over the sea morning and afternoon, the rising slopes of Vesuvius, were tranquil ecstasy. The solitude of his private life was, moreover, grateful, after the long years spent in close daily intimacy with that beloved Famiglia, the members of which were bound to him rather by spiritual connection than by natural congeniality of taste. It would be false to say that he missed even Catherine; he had never, despite her natural fears, known such sickly dependence on her physical presence as

many of her disciples felt. He thought of her now reverently, as of one who at the heart of storms abode in peace, served her as best he might at his appointed post, and dwelt not overmuch on that inner life concerning which she always bade him distress himself as little as possible.

He had more leisure after a month or two; for Giovanna, throwing aside her mask, took the field openly on behalf of Clement. She would none the less have continued her intercourse with Neri, whom she still viewed with high favour; but he, in disgust, avoided the Court. He suggested return to Rome, but this Catherine forbade; she wished him still at Naples, to observe and report, some new turn in affairs being, indeed, possible at any moment. He obeyed, nothing loth, and in the long hours which he now controlled resumed those literary and poetic studies which had been the delight of his youth. Gazing out over the wide waters, he read much in the Divine Comedy, choosing by preference the "Purgatorio," and the first three cantos of the "Paradiso," not advancing to the more exalted and abstruse portions of the poem. He reviewed his Petrarch also; and as he murmured to himself the high harmonies of the "Trionfi" sighed for the comradeship of Ilaria; not of this great lady whom he saw at times moving on her stately way, arrayed now in sweeping robes of misty violet; not assuredly of the passion-stricken woman of that late autumn at Rocca d'Orcia; but of the girlhood cousin, sweetest playfellow he had ever known.

In his tranquillity, thought turned to absent friends. He sat one morning in a little grape-arbour, ripe clusters hanging above his head, and meditated long over a letter from Louis de Frontaigne. Communication, though not frequent, had never ceased between the two.

"You have done well to visit me by letter, my brother, since you would not come in person. Long before your letter reached me I had formed the plan of writing to you——" "A pest of this Latin!" Louis broke off, dropping into familiar French. "I am inclined to think that Dante is right about the uses of the vernacular. In plain speech, then, *mon cher*, I was rejoiced to hear from you, and none

the less that I cannot yield to your arguments. Not that they are unsound. Indeed, I may say in confidence that it seems to me self-evident that he of Bari is the legal Pope, and the Cardinals are, as you clearly imply, an impudent set to deny it. But you should realize that to me the question of legality has no importance. What has true religion to do with this cumbersome machinery of elections? In Christianity, as we see it, on the other hand, what matters? No, my friend, I remain good Clementine. And why? Not wholly for my personal advantage—though promotion is rapid in these days—I am promised a bishopric anon; neither for admiration of that fascinating scamp, Count Robert. Nay, but for good cause; the victory of Clement is the victory of French enlightenment and *gentilesse*, the undoing of that disastrous return from Avignon to Rome, which in more senses than one has entrenched the Papacy among ruins. As for your fanatic of an Urban, with his vulgar Neapolitan temper, I confess, *mon ami*, that I find it humorous to picture you as the champion of this gentleman. And how fare you at Naples—centre of the joy of the senses, as the delightful Avignon of old was the centre of the joy of the mind? When will you leave this world of affairs in which you find yourself for ever perversely on the opposite side from that for which Nature intended you? When retire into that region of lettered pursuits for which, I do assure you, you are pre-destined? I myself, disgusted with these storms of State, do firmly propose forthwith, in a month, in a year, to take mine own advice. How fares the Muse? Send me, I beg you, a *canzone*. I will answer with a treatise on the Greek verb, with which I now boast at last a bowing acquaintance."

Surely, Neri reflected, Louis went far. In any scheme of things, however bad, in any machine, however faulty, even in the Catholic Church, if you will, honesty should play a certain part. He repudiated the letter vigorously. Nevertheless, it had its reaction in subconsciousness, as often occurs.

He was still thinking over Louis' words, and noting idly how soft the afternoon shadows lay on the sea, when he

perceived a little pleasure barque skirting the coast, and headed apparently for his arbour. As the breeze impelled it nearer music floated over the waters. A few moments, and he descried within three of the most charming among the younger ladies of the court, with their attendant cavaliers. He eyed the little boat longingly as it approached like some swift spirit of the sea. The whole seemed part of the dream of pleasantness in which of late he moved. It was at hand now, moored to his tiny wharf, and the youngest lady called out gaily :

"Messer Eremito, we have found your cell."

"And like many hermits," laughed the Cavaliere di San Michele, "he appears to welcome the intrusion."

"To be welcome indeed to Messer Raniero," suggested another, "we should be the barque described by Messer Dante, bearing the souls of the blessed over the spiritual sea."

Neri found his tongue at last.

"Courteous ladies should surely be well-nigh as welcome as blessed souls," he said smiling. "Is it your sweet pleasure to land, fair friends ?"

"No, but to lure you on the waters," said the lady who had first spoken.

He ran down the steps of the arbour, and leapt lightly into the boat. The ladies clapped their hands.

"Violetta betted that you would not come, Petronella that you would," said the third lady. "For me, I was neutral, but my fears were with Violetta."

As the sun sank lower the wind dropped, the men bent singing to their oars.

"Era tutta soletta
In un prato d'amore
Quella chi ferì il cuore
Di me con sua saetta,"

sang a baritone, and the tenor took up the melody :

"Non sentì mai Achille
Per Pulisena bella
Le cocenti faville
Quant'io sentì per quella,

Udendo sua favella
Angelica e vezzosa,
Parlar si amorosa
In su la fresca erbetta."

"We were playing a game, messere," said the Countess Violettta. "We seek to decide which is the fairest lady of the court—exclusive, of course, of us three. If we can agree, we shall plan a surprise for that most lovely one."

"My vote," said Messer Romano Atacusi, "is for Madonna Ghisola di Viva. The dusk of her hair is soft as that of the thickest smoke Ischia sends forth, and like the smoke there are red reflections in it."

"'Ware the volcano!" cried Petronella; and they all laughed. "A merry beauty for me," she improvised, speaking half verse, half prose, like the others. "Rose-white as asphodel blossom, and fragrant as the cyclamen of the hills. What say you to the Contessina Nella? Who can hear her laugh without remembering what someone has said, 'Laughter is the radiance of the soul'?"

"Stately as the cliffs of Capri is Catella, the maid of my affections," sang one of the boatmen.

"Coral and pearl have gone to the making of Agnese, my love," piped up his companion.

"To my mind," said one of the cavaliers who had not yet spoken, "the Countess Ilaria Rinaldini is the fairest lady of the court."

The eyes of the Cavaliere di San Michele flashed emphatic assent.

'She is too sad," objected Violetta, who was the youngest of the party.

"So was the sea beneath the clouds of dawn," said the Cavaliere. "It sighed of sorrows without end. The clouds melted, and the grey waters brightened to turquoise, but whether under clouds or sun, the sea is mystery. As the ocean to the flower, so is the face of Madonna Ilaria to the face of the Contessina Nella."

"She has the grace of the swaying wave," assented Petronella."

"And its light in her eyes," Camilla added.

"The lady is fair," acknowledged Messer Romano, "but too unapproachable for me!"

Startled, Neri saw, or fancied he saw, a little, disagreeable, complacent smile flit across the countenance of the Cavaliere.

"What thinks Messer Raniero of her beauty?" asked Violetta. "I have heard he is of her kin."

"My friend, Andrea Vanni," he returned, evading the question, "says that the artist who can paint that face of hers shall be born in the after-time. He insists, I know not why, that the man must be of North Italy."

The Cavaliere smiled, interested.

"I apprehend Messer Andrea's thought," said he. "Also, the artist must have travelled widely, and have learned all of beauty that women can teach."

"The ladies of his day," remarked Camilla, "will probably be lovelier than Madonna Ilaria. I believe that each new age sees men and women fairer than the last."

"I think that cannot be," said the Countess Violetta naïvely. "Was never woman so fair as Madama Elena of Troy, and she lived before the coming of our Saviour."

"I agree with Madonna Camilla," said Neri dreamily. "Gazing at Madonna Ilaria, I think there is come into the world something strange and new, revealed to us of these later days to our joy and our undoing."

"Countess Ilaria told me that he was a poet," whispered one of the ladies.

The sun had set, and the boatmen were singing together under their breath a *ballata:*

"Ell' a i capelli suoi crespi e volanti,
Con un colore angelica di perla,
E a i vaghi occhi e onesti sembianti,
Ch'à veder par una rosa novella.

* * * *

E a un bocchin che pare un paradisso,
Riluce più che un sole di mattina,
Quest' è la mia dolze anima mia fina,
Che avanza di biltà ogni gioconda."

"The beauty of this coast," said Neri, speaking slow, "is

as the beauty of women. It transcends all I have imagined, yet is it alien to me. I have felt a little thus in Rome, but not so strongly. In Umbria, in my own Tuscany, all is more pure, more distant, yet more clear. The eye is drawn afar to where earth meets the sky ; here it seeks to draw all to itself. Beholding that landscape, one dreams forever of a better country. Beholding this, the present glory satisfies, and dreams are naught. It is a beauty unhallowed ; as I gaze thereat Christendom is forgot."

"But no !" cried Violetta piously, while the others joined her in chorus of protestation. "Is there a city in Italy more Catholic than Naples ? Has not our most gracious Queen distinguished herself by the building of churches ?"

"Where in Europe shall you find more priests ?" asked the Cavaliere di San Michele, shrugging his shoulders.

"Messer Raniero," queried Camilla archly. "Will there be everywhere twice as many churches and convents and priests, now that there are two Popes instead of one ?"

And everyone laughed.

"It is a great advantage, in one sense, to have two Popes," remarked Violetta. "What splendid festivals we had when Pope Urban was elected ! And then our Queen decides that Clement is Pope after all, and who can forget the bridge of boats, and the great doings at the Castle dell' Uovo, till that delightful Father of our souls got frightened and ran away ?"

Neri had been musing.

"Even in your churches," he said suddenly, turning to Camilla, "I find something strange. They are sumptuous indeed ; the worshippers are fervent and many. But there steals over me a fearsome feeling, as if the worship were given, not to One I love and trust, but to deities long dead, or worse than dead, it may be. Old things are mighty here."

A slight shudder ran over one or two of his hearers, but the boatmen were still singing softly, the tenor taking the woman's part :

AMANTE.

"Se d' amor ti diletta—O giovenetta,
Ne' tuo' bei atti vaghi or si vedrà."

AMATA.

"I' mi son vaga' e solo amor mi piace ;
E d' altro che di voi pensier non ho.
En voi è il mio diletto e la mia pace,
E senza voi, messere, esser no so.
Si m'ha preso il cuore—il vostro amore
Che innamorata sempre mi terrà."

The stars were out ; the boat was nearing the shore.

"We are all agreed, are we not, that the Countess Ilaria is the fairest ?" asked Camilla, as they prepared to land.

"Allow me," said the Cavaliere, "to be responsible for the proposed surprise ; it shall, with your pleasure, take the form of a May-day festa."

"I have heard," said Violetta, stepping to shore, "that the Queen is planning a marriage for Madonna Ilaria ; and, indeed, she should not remain unwed. But no one, to my knowledge, has learned the bridegroom's name."

CHAPTER VIII

A PROPOSITION

"But the University of Paris has pronounced in favour of Clement," said Giovanna. She was sitting in her favourite attitude, nursing her chin and watching Neri with the quizzical, half-admiring gaze that had annoyed him from the first.

"Madama," he replied, "it is easy to perceive that Messer our Lord God has dowered you with a mind capable of making your own judgments. As Sister Catherine writes: 'Oh, dearest mother (I call you a mother in so far as I hope to see you a faithful daughter of Holy Church), it seems to me that you have no pity on yourself. Alas, alas! because I love you I grieve over the evil state of your soul and body. I have written you, through compassion, many times, showing you that what people make you believe true is a lie, and pointing to the scourge of Divine justice, which waits, ready, if you do not rise above such errors. It is a human thing to sin, but to persevere in sin is of the devil. Oh me! no one tells you the truth, and you will not seek out servants of God to tell it to you! Oh, how blessed my soul would be if I could come into your parts, and lay down my life to restore to you the good of heaven and the good of earth! Alas! do not wait for the time which you are not sure of having! do not choose that my eyes should have to shed fountains of tears over your poor wretched soul, or over your body—dear soul, that I account as my own! If I look at your soul I see that it is dead, because it is separated from its body; it is persecuting, not Pope Urban VI., but our truth and our faith. Once, mother

and daughter mine, I expected that, as you used to write me, this faith, by the Divine mercy, should be spread among the infidels by your means; but now for my sins——'"

"You need not read further in the letter," interrupted the Queen with a frown. But Neri kept the manuscript unrolled as he remarked firmly:

"Had the University decided contrary to your Majesty's inclination, would you not make short work of their arguments?"

She gave a short laugh.

"Probably, to be candid. But I did not send for you to discuss this eternal subject. Popes and their quarrels! The wrongs of Holy Church! Heavens, Messer Raniero, do you never think of anything else?"

Messer Raniero was not at all afraid of the Queen, and he was getting angry.

"It is the sole subject of interest which I have the honour of possessing in common with your Majesty," he answered tranquilly.

"Do not be too sure of that." The elderly Queen could, when she chose, assume a very regal dignity. "One does not escape private responsibility by plunging into public affairs."

"I trust that I have never evaded any such," said Neri, surprised.

"There is, however, a person at my Court concerning whom you must justly be considered negligent." The rebuke was administered not unkindly. "You are, as I understand, nearest relative on the mother's side to the Countess Ilaria Rinaldini."

"The Countess Ilaria," said Neri, with constraint, "has made it quite clear, since my arrival, that she cared to claim no connection."

"Nevertheless, at a decisive moment in her affairs it is my duty to consult you. You must surely perceive that it is not fitting for her to remain unwed."

"She has been twice wed already," sighed Neri, and was on the point of adding, "It would seem to suffice," but checked himself, remembering Giovanna's four husbands. It was fortunate; the colour had risen to the roots of her grey hair.

"In these times," she said haughtily, "a woman, whatever her rank, must have protection. As the year of mourning of the Countess draws to an end, her future must be at once considered." And Neri in his heart knew that the Queen was right.

"There will be no lack of suitors," pursued Giovanna. "What say you to the Master of the Waters and Forests? He is a discreet man of large revenues, and his children are all married."

"A frosty fate for a fair lady," said Neri coldly.

"What, then, of the Cavaliere di San Michele? There would be no frost to that union."

Frost? No! Cultured, poetic, debonair, the Cavaliere was generally known as a loose liver, very delicately depraved in his pleasures. The thought of him as Ilaria's husband was flame in the nerves, in the brain.

"Or," Giovanna continued calmly, "I see not what objection you could proffer to the Baron Porloni."

"Why wed her at all?" cried Neri in desperation. "Why not——"

"Consign her to the cloister?" interrupted Giovanna. "'Tis the only other choice."

He gathered his self-control.

"Has Madonna Ilaria shown any disposition to any of these suitors?" he inquired.

"The Countess Ilaria" — Giovanna was all motherly solicitude — "is hard to read. After the news of her brother's suicide, which reached her when she had been with us scarce two months, she became subject to attacks of melancholy. Since her husband's death they have ceased, but her occasional gaiety has ceased also. White silence enfolds her. There is another possibility," she continued after a moment. Again her manner changed, acquiring significance. She leaned forward, scrutinizing his face with the keen eyes of a woman and ruler accustomed to read the minds of men. "Tell me, Messer Raniero," she said abruptly, and with a slight touch of scorn, "Did you never yourself dream of any bride beside the sweet Bride of Christ?"

Neri blinked, and caught his breath; his eyes opened

wide, but saw nothing. The Queen had risen to her feet, a fine and commanding presence.

"Raniero de' Pagliaresi"—she spoke with formal state and elaboration of manner—"I proffer you herewith the hand of the fairest lady at the Court of Naples—the Countess Ilaria Rinaldini."

Neri had turned pale.

"Your Majesty knows well," he spoke, pressing his knuckles heavily against the table, "that I cannot accept this offer."

"I know no such thing! How should I know?" Giovanna was pacing up and down, her words rapid, persuasive, impatient. "Are you not both young? Good to look upon? Unwed? From the same region, too; of the same tastes; friends, as I hear, from childhood. Your rank is less than hers. 'Tis the sole obstacle I see. But I, too, have I not married beneath my rank, and been none the less happy? Are you, forsooth, too religious? Yet you wear the habit of the world. You have taken no vow against marriage. Have I not seen your eyes follow her? Ay, and I was not jealous! Once, indeed—— But I am past that folly, an old woman, now, as your Benincasa says!"

"Since, Madama, you observe so closely," said Neri hastily, "you have perceived that the lady will have naught to do with me."

"Oh, the will of ladies!" returned Giovanna—"of that let no man presume to speak!"

"Does the Countess Ilaria"—despite himself, Neri's voice trembled—"know of the honour you propose to me?"

"Certainly not," said Giovanna smoothly; "it is from your side that negotiations should begin." And whether or no she were lying he found it impossible to surmise. "Very likely she would have nothing to say to the proposal." The Queen was smiling now. "Only yester-eve I saw a light flicker in her eye at a word from the Cavaliere di San Michele. Still, one could always try, and you should have my adherence."

"Your Majesty!" cried Neri, summoning his senses, "this is idle talk! Madonna Ilaria and I are, as you are perfectly aware, cousins."

"Is this your only objection?" queried Giovanna.

"No, no!" But the negative that rose to his lips was not uttered. Was it because the hundred reasons against this marriage were too delicate for the ears of Giovanna? "That fact is enough; it is final," he said.

The Queen shrugged her shoulders.

"Did you never hear of such things as Papal dispensations?" asked she. "Yet you have been at Avignon. You must have learned there how I myself received from Pope Clement VI.—a most agreeable Father of Christendom he was—a dispensation for marrying my father's cousin, Louis of Tarentum. For the matter of that," she added, smiling at her memories, "I had married him without waiting for sanction."

"Thus fares a Queen, but not thus common folk," said Neri.

"Not, I grant you, at the hands of an ill-mannered fanatic like Urban"—Giovanna, serious again, studied him as she spoke—"but with a pleasant, sympathetic nature like that of Pope Clement, a man who knows life, knows the world, the case is different. Messer Raniero"—she had come close, and put one hand kindly on his shoulder—"remember the decision of the University of Paris, that learned, honourable body! I charge myself," she continued slowly, "with the matter of the dispensation. Your marriage shall be all that is sound, decorous, correct. Trust me! I think you may at times have misread this poor old heart. I would see you happy, you and Ilaria, sad children that you are."

The persuasive graciousness that distinguished Giovanna among all the Sovereigns of Europe was at its height, in words and bearing.

Surely it was white heat of indignation that tingled through Neri's mind and body.

"Permit me, your Majesty, to withdraw," he said curtly.

"Not"—the Queen spoke with authority now—"not till I know whether this marriage is repugnant to you. Is it so?"

Surely, surely, by all that was best within him, by holy

memory and not less holy fear, by the steady consecration of patient years and the swift insight of supreme moments! Yet Neri hesitated.

"I entirely repudiate the possibility of it," he said presently, raising his head and looking the Queen proudly in the eye, "and will once more request your Majesty's permission to withdraw."

"It is I who will withdraw," said Giovanna. "And I will ask you to remain here a few moments, till you shall receive somewhat which I wish to resign to your charge."

* * * * *

Left alone, he paced swiftly to and fro, and paused by the casement. Capri, a faceted amethyst, gleamed in the sapphire sea. Yes, he was very angry! And he raised his head to brush something from his eyes; for against the background of enchanting light and hue the face of the dream-Ilaria wavered before his sight.

An opening door, a light footfall, betokened the messenger of the Queen. He turned. The Countess Rinaldini had just entered.

She was stately and unsmiling. White silence, as Giovanna had said, enfolded her.

"I was sent hither by the Queen," she said quietly, with downcast eyes. "There is, I perceive, an error. I will withdraw."

"There is no error!" The words leaped from Neri's lips before he was aware. "Ilaria, speak to me! Stay!" For she had turned to go; but when, at his request, she paused on the threshold, he could find no further words. "Is all well with you here in this Court?" he stammered at last.

She lifted heavy lids and eyed him wondering as he stood in the casement against the background of waters. He was flushed, the habitual self-control of his face quite broken up. She sighed.

"Here, as elsewhere, it is a phantom scene," she answered sadly. "But if the fellowship of phantoms be ordained, it is as well that they be, like those of Naples, radiant. Yes, I like the Court."

"And I," said Neri, "am I a phantom like the rest?"

The surprise in her eyes increased.

"Ay," she said, "a phantom like the rest."

He came a step nearer, and his voice, usually clear, was slightly hoarse.

"And the Cavaliere di San Michele," he asked in an undertone, "is he a phantom too?"

But now Ilaria gazed at him with a look difficult to read.

"Why do you ask?" she queried with hauteur.

"I know not why!" cried Neri. "Are you not Queen of Phantoms, Proserpine? Lady of Shadows, you, but of shades most wondrous fair! Do you remember the rose-garden of Belcaro?"

"I remember," said Ilaria dreamily; "'twas but a masque—a pretty one, in sooth. I can see the garland of Amor, transformed into roses of flame."

"Ah, the masque you played in that night," said he, "was one of my devising. But now you move in a pageant wherein is no part for me to play!"

"The days come apace, my cousin," she returned, still cold, "when 'tis beneath the Triumph of time, not the Triumph of Amor, that thou and I must bow. I have long turned my wedding-chest about. Leave idle talk, and let me go!"

"Ay, to the Cavaliere!" he cried, and clenched his fingers. "Ilaria! And if it were not the rose-garden I bade you remember, but the hawthorn by the castle wall?"

"Shame on you! Shame!" was her answer, and her face was pale no longer.

She had turned, she was gone, and Neri, gazing stupefied after her garment's hem, brushed his forehead once again.

"She is angered, but she need not have fled," he murmured. "I was not intending to make love to her."

What he had intended, however, was probably not very clear to himself. And presently he too sighed heavily, and left the room. Meantime the letter of Catherine Benincasa to the Queen of Naples lay unheeded on the floor, and Giovanna, returning a few moments later and seeing it lie there, gave a fairly satisfied smile.

CHAPTER IX

THE TEST

In two weeks—and it was then late April—Giovanna summoned him again. He obeyed, in turbulent uncertainty as to the purpose of the audience. For that scourge of Divine justice, the sentence of excommunication, deferred, as Neri knew, by Catherine's pleadings, had fallen at last. Feverish defiance, unholy gaiety, pervaded the Court. The Queen was said to flout the sentence ; yet surely, able stateswoman that she was, knew well that it was no matter for flouting. The kingdom of Naples was held as a fief from the Pope, and excommunication involved the Crown itself in jeopardy. It was entirely possible that the active blow would succeed where threats had failed, and bring her to terms with the party of Urban. Was it on affairs of State, was it on more intimate matters, that the Queen of Naples desired to converse with Raniero de' Pagliaresi ?

The public crisis was here; yet Neri, since his last interview, had sent to Rome an urgent plea that he might be recalled. The surprised refusal of Catherine came as a message in a letter from Barduccio. Her health, so wrote the scribe, had for some weeks alarmed the Famiglia. She lay on her pallet, unable to move her lower limbs, firmly convinced that her sufferings, although natural, were not physical, and that the hour of her departure was at hand. Now was no time, said Barduccio, with a touch of reproach, to trouble her with importunities ! Yet he thought—and Neri had seen similar effects too often to dispute him—that joyful tidings might still revive her powers ; and the letter

ended with strong appeal, in which the implicit faith of the younger man in the elder shone clear. Surely, did Neri devote thereto all his energy, all his prayers, he might at least persuade Giovanna to stay neutral! And Neri, reading, sighed impatiently, aware of his own worse than helplessness.

Sullenly he went at the Queen's bidding, through that street of the Provençals which she had built between the Castel del' Uovo and the Castel Nuovo. It was a day of driving wind and rain. The sound of the sea beat weirdly through the city street. It penetrated to the audience-chamber, which the Queen entered presently, a packet in her hand. Her bearing was sombre. Through all personal preoccupation, Neri felt a pang of sympathy. He was in presence of a harassed and lonely woman. Some touch of greatness among Giovanna's headstrong passions — her impetuous generosity to those she loved, her honest efforts during her long reign to maintain administrative justice—had won his admiration, almost his respect. To-day, knowing the doom which overhung her realm, none could see her without emotion. The close scrutiny with which she regarded him for a moment annoyed him no longer: he felt to her no antagonism, but an effort to serve, to help.

She detached a letter from the packet, and handed it to him without a word. He recognised the writing of Louis de Frontaigne.

"Read it!" she said laughing a little as he held it in his hand as one dazed. "Yes, it is magic! But the talisman will not work unless you read."

He turned to the chill light, and read words in which danced the sunshine of Provence, for the letter was in a merry strain.

"Fair greeting to my friend," wrote Louis. "Welcome, if surprising, are the tidings conveyed to me by the secretary of Her Majesty the gracious Queen of Naples. Yet why surprising? I remember a young gentleman, lost in contemplation of Martini's green-robed Princess in the cathedral porch at Avignon, and a half-confidence vouchsafed a passing friend. Am I mistaken in my surmise that the painted

beauty lives and breathes in the Countess Rinaldini? If so, tell me not. For the guess lent eloquence to my plea for a dispensation. And Clement—more urbane than your miscalled Urban, whom I trust that you will henceforth urbanely renounce—granted the favour with a light heart. He remembered the lady. She was in the train of the Queen, and did him homage at the Castel del' Uovo. 'She kissed my foot. Right fain I was it had been my mouth,' said the merry Pontiff. Nay, you need not frown; there are fair dames enow in Provence, so that one pines not overlong for charms remembered. Rather, you are to thank him—and me, though, as well you know, I would rènder you an I might far more painful service. And on your wedding trip—would it might bring you once more to Avignon—you shall pass, if you may, by the monastery of Basilian monks at Otranto, and wheedle from Abbot Niceta one of those Greek manuscripts, of which, I hear, he hath great store. Surely Greek manuscripts were fitting to comfort the solitudes of a wifeless man, vowed to service of Holy Church, like the devoted Louis, who with joyful heart and true sincerity bids you and the fair Countess Ilaria, fare well, and long!"

"Here is the dispensation," said Giovanna, unfolding before his eyes an imposing manuscript of many seals. He reached his hand. She held the parchment away for a moment, studying his face, then relinquished it to his grasp with a smile. It was elaborated in due form.

"You need not look at it as if it were turning you to stone," said Giovanna. "Yes, I had sent for it before our last conversation."

"And by what right?" He spoke with all the dignity he could muster.

"By the right of my reading of your heart, perhaps." She was still smiling that kindly, inscrutable smile.

"But if I refuse? And I do refuse." He gave to his words an accent of finality.

Giovanna, not ungently, took the parchment from his hands. "But why?" said she.

"Why?" cried Neri. "Because I can recognise no validity to this parchment. Because, with all its solemn

pomp of seal and flourish, 'tis but so much dust in my sight. Because to avail myself thereof were to turn traitor to my party and my past."

"Be it so!" returned Giovanna. "I feared some such response. What, now, if I bid you look farther afield? What if you can perform an act of highest service to Urban by availing yourself of this dispensation? Listen!" she continued rapidly.

Neri frowned in bewilderment.

"Put the case that the letters of your Benincasa had more than half convinced me—terrified, touched, what you will;—that this last weapon of excommunication has done its work. True, I am too deeply involved to turn once more without delay to the side of Urban, too outraged by his insults to care to do so. Yet, as your Sister Catherine remarks, one can at least stay neutral. Messer Raniero"—she had drawn herself to her full height, and her swift words were formally uttered—"I make you an offer. Use you this dispensation—wed, and that within the fortnight, this most fair and sweet lady, the Countess Ilaria. I on my side will proclaim to all Europe my moral scruples, will make my submission to Urban on condition of the excommunication being removed, and will pledge me to a year's absolute neutrality in this contention."

She paused; and the first perception that rose in Neri's stupefied mind was that of his diplomatic victory. His months of pleading had not been in vain! Success, and for the first time, had attended his diplomatic efforts! The mortification, never forgotten, of his comparative failure at Avignon need trouble him no more. It lay in his hand to change the politics of Europe!

And almost at the same instant he thought of Catherine. She lay ill, languishing, discouraged. But he, who had seen her cast off in an hour an illness seeming mortal, under the stimulus of some glad tidings, who knew her buoyant, womanly power of feeding on trifles light as air—could he not see how her step would regain its freedom, her face its light, at this great news?

And the price he was to pay? Why, union with Ilaria!

Not so—the price was treachery.

He lifted puzzled brows on the Queen.

"Madama," said he, "I am at a loss to conceive why you should be so eager for this marriage."

Giovanna sighed.

"You may well wonder," she answered; "but see, messere, in a world where one has found pleasure abundant and happiness rare, the desire to confer happiness grows strong as one grows older. I cannot think it matters much who rules on Peter's throne—that Robert, whom you call a man of sin, or the coarse Archbishop of Bari. Suppose, if you will, that caprice led me, while pride holds me, in my choice. But that two hearts whose secrets I have read be glad before they die—that matters! Add, if you like, that, woman-wise, I find it easier to yield my will in a large matter if at the same time I gain it in a small. You look unsatisfied. See, I will show you deeper." Giovanna was looking old and frail. "I am a solitary woman. Charles of Durazzo was son, not only of my adoption, but of my heart. Conflict attracts me less than thirty years ago. You have a look of Charles about the forehead. My people are disaffected, my Court is light; and after all I have tried to rule as became a descendant of King Robert! Suppose I crave beside me affection, loyalty. Suppose a childless woman longs to attach you to her Court. I have heard of your legal studies. 'Tis a theme in which my mind delights. Why should you not become successor to Niccolò Spinello, Chancellor in good time of my kingdom? Why not, in serving me, serve the kingdom of Naples, and render my reign not all inglorious, and my heart not all a wilderness?"

The tears in her eyes called tears to Neri's own, but he made answer, low:

"I may not serve you; I am bound." And then, impelled by her strange confidence to throw aside reserve, "Does Ilaria know of this?" he asked.

Giovanna had recovered herself.

"How, think you, we knew enough to appeal for help to your friend, the Bishop de Frontaigne?" she queried. "Ay, Ilaria knows; but when the document came she clasped her white neck and shuddered. Frankly, I am not sure that you

could win her; but she has sent a message to you. If it be your will to profit by the dispensation, you are to seek her answer to-morrow morn at the festa of the eve of May, given in her honour by the Cavaliere di San Michele. You change colour! But I assure you"—Giovanna had drawn near, and spoke in an emphatic undertone—"I assure you that there is, to my knowledge, no truth in the rumour afloat that she has accorded him the last favours."

Neri recoiled in disgust, while memory of a look he had surprised in the Cavaliere's face besieged him.

"I had never heard that rumour," he said coldly, "nor should I for a moment have credited it. But as for the use of this document, your Majesty, my last word as my first is, No!"

"Why, then, did you not tear it in pieces when you had it in your hands ten minutes ago?" asked the Queen, arching her eyebrows. "Oh no!"—as he reached impetuously forward—"you are not to touch it again. Your audience is ended. I commend you to do good thinking between now and to-morrow eve."

* * * * *

Thinking enough, forsooth, whether good or ill!

He sat long hours with hands clasping his brow, rising now and then to pace his little chamber, glad that the storm still raged outside and the lips of the sea were white. Within, as without, was tempest. The forces of sincerity, of cynicism, of honourable purpose, of false desire—gusts from every quarter of his spirit's sky—had united in one mighty resultant wind that beat upon him, that blew him—whither? A wind blowing in a fog, a fearsome thing always! For the confusion of mind that had been his enemy from his youth had overswept him, blotting and blurring all things.

Catherine? Why, assuredly she would rejoice! What if the news of his marriage cost her a small pang? Greater would be her joy over the conversion of Giovanna! Oh, your high, cold women, oblivious of the heart's clamour, careless of small, stray lives that cling to them! Was she not always ready to sacrifice her nearest, dearest, on the altar of a Cause? The little snake that had coiled and crept

in his bosom since Avignon days raised its head, hissed aloud. What heed had she paid him during these last months? Was it by his own choice that he had come to Naples?

He pushed back the hair from his eyes. Her trustful voice was in his ears. "I know that thou understandest me without many words," it was saying. And what kind of understanding was this—to dream that she, with whom the natural sense of values and proportion was for the most part reversed, could for a moment rejoice in a result, however desirable, that had its root in sin? No; the fog had cleared. In the name of simple right, of grave good-faith, he stood up and faced the blast.

Ah! But a deeper question rose. Why should this thing be sin? Superficial disloyalty, obviously; but to what, good heavens! was he striving to be loyal? And again he buried his face and thought; then, going to the window, looked out on the grey world.

The crisis of his life had come. To accept this sham dispensation, proffered him by the man impudently and by palpable lie foisted on Christendom as its Pope, were to renounce, once for all, not only his party, but his belief in the Catholic Church.

Yes; and why not? Doubtless it was well, for the sake of the vulgar, that a legal Pope should reign in Europe: his action would decidedly help to that end. But for emancipated minds—like his, like Louis de Frontaigne's—what matter? His eyes rested lovingly on the choice characters of the letter from Avignon. The memory of all that stimulating intercourse of four years ago, of his great hour on Mount Ventoux, rose clear. He had defended then—how earnestly!—the mystic view of the Church as the body of Christ in the world. This view had certainly not been easy to maintain in the face of facts, nor had observations since—he arched his eyebrows—made it easier. Faith, he had learned, was activity rather than vision; but, after all, to keep on for ever without the vision might be no better than a blind fanaticism. What if he let the old activity end?

Deny the Church! He did but dream! Again a lull in the storm. Had he kept on his way doggedly, through all

intellectual incertitudes, only to abandon it now, at the prick of passionate desire? But the thought with which he had dallied, now existing, as it were, a clearly defined form in the atmosphere of the room, recoiled upon him, pressed on the brain, dazzled the eyes. Suppose he consented—what waited him? The life sketched by Giovanna: a life of scholarly pursuits, perhaps not useless, but unteased by the irksome necessity of definite convictions—holding itself, indeed, complacently superior to partisans of any stamp—simplified, released from thraldom. A life—yes, let the knowledge come, let it inebriate, submerge—a life by Ilaria's side! Could he but persuade her—for there was something strange at work in her spirit! Ilaria! Ilaria! The name was on the wind. The sea shouted it, birds flying past the window called it in their flight! What though deep instinct murmured that to wed her were moral disaster, perhaps not for himself alone? Of what avail that he spoke aloud the name of Catherine? He had departed unblest, and that spirit was not upon him in this hour. He was abandoned to the elder gods. They were abroad, these gods of ancient days: they rode the blast, they laughed in the far reaches of the sky, they whispered in his heart. He leaned out into the gale. The rain had ceased; between scudding clouds shone tracts of clear, untender blue; in the sheets of racing foam beneath the window, gilded by the low, returning sun, Neri caught the pale shining of outspread hair, the curves of nude limbs, the loveliness of life primeval.

"It will be fair weather for the festa to-morrow," he heard himself say aloud, and wondered at his own folly. "But I"—he added the words in haste, to the sky and ocean—"shall not be there."

Yet when the morning came he was among the first arrivals.

CHAPTER X

THE HILL OF VENUS

Some by land, some by water, the May Day revellers took their morning way along the coast towards the ruins of ancient Baiæ. Neri was on horseback, a friend having furnished him with an excellent mount. As he cantered on, the road continually showed the far-sparkling sea; a flock of brilliant butterflies dipped and poised on the waters —pleasure-boats bound for the tryst. Ilaria! Ilaria! She and he, by different ways, were moving to the same goal.

Horses proved swifter than sails that morning; the riders arrived half an hour before the boats. The place was a lonely wonder. The sloping hillside, broken by the green hollow of an old amphitheatre, rose gently from the beach. From turf strewn with wild hyacinth, cyclamen, star of Bethlehem, and tiny fleur-de-lys, great columns, half-embedded in the ground, raised ivy-mantled shafts—now broken, now crowned with Corinthian capitals which peered through trailing vines. Choice marbles, their rose or white mellowed to golden, lay scattered here and there, the surfaces, fluted or bevelled, still gleaming with the polish of centuries ago. Below and above the amphitheatre mysterious masonry broke the climbing slope. The ruins extended to the very verge of the sea.

Neri ran down the bank as the first boat drew near. Under an awning of silk, shot with green and blue and gold, sat Ilaria, the little Countess Violetta, and the Cavaliere di San Michele. The girl was rippling with joyous laughter. Ilaria smiled, and the beauty of the day found its

meaning. She had thrown her misty mourning aside; her gown, or so Neri thought, was the same which Proserpina had once worn in the Triumph of Amor—at least, the same strange broideries shone among its folds.

She stepped ashore daintily. Her fingers rested on Neri's proffered hand, but her eyes, though with inscrutable expression, accepted the adoring look of the Cavaliere.

"We have been sailing over marvels!" cried Violetta, wide-eyed. "Below the clear green waves rise palaces! We saw great white columns and a pavement of colours. Did we not, madonna Ilaria?"

"Yes," said Ilaria, wondering too. "Had they not quivered in the light, we could have traced the pattern."

"The palaces of the sea-ladies!" Violetta exclaimed gleefully. "I thought I saw one, but she turned out to be a fish."

"The home of strange sea-creatures in any case," mused Ilaria—"of flowers that are alive. Did you see that long blue ribbon sway and beckon us?"

Her gravity and pallor had vanished with her mists of mourning. She was flushed and gay. A startled quietude, as of one expectant, was upon her.

"I have bidden you to a land of enchantment, fair ladies all," laughed the Cavaliere, as they climbed upward. "We are still within the power of the ocean, you see," he added, when the company paused by the half-buried columns below the amphitheatre.

"'Tis true!" exclaimed Neri, examining the shafts. "This stone is fretted by the waves. See the clustered barnacles and tiny shells, clinging half-way up."

And as the party exchanged greetings all studied the strange sight.

"Probably," reflected a young page of the Court, "'twas the doing of Messer Vergilio."

"He had great power hereabout," assented Andrea Ravignano, "and was a mighty clerk of necromancy. Perhaps he built all these marvels."

"No, child," returned the Master of the Forests and Waters, who was a sententious gentleman. "'Twas the

old Roman folk that built them ages gone. A city rose here once—a marvel, indeed, as these ruins tell. For their pleasure men built it, and here they lived and throve. And evil livers were they all, and slaves to the foul fiends their gods."

"But how did the city sink into the sea?" asked Violetta.

"That was the work of Messer Saint Paul," replied the other. "He landed here, and preached the Cross of our Saviour; and when men would not heed, but spat upon that Cross and defied it, he laid the land under a curse, and it sank to the depths of the sea."

"And when the waves had done their work"—it was Ilaria, speaking dreamily—"they flowed back, and the ruins rested on the gentle hill. But for ever and for ever do they remember the sea." She sighed a little.

"This slope on which we sit is all building within," ventured the little page. "Behind us is many a love-grotto, tunnelled deep and far. The country-folk, when they run the harrow, find great walls. And so none dare come here of nights: strange things were seen."

"Perhaps the waters will rise again some day, and swallow Naples and the Court; and we shall turn into sea-folk all," Ilaria pursued, laughing a little wildly. "Subjects of Lady Venus should we be. She was queen of the sea, I've heard."

"Though Terce is hardly past, such talk is not wise," said someone.

And two or three crossed themselves. But as the light words drifted on, dim passages of thought, at the end of which immemorial things were gleaming, had opened to Neri.

Violetta had been deftly weaving a green garland of ivy.

"Dream no more, fairest lady," she said. "Smile on your servants. Tell me what flowers to weave into your chaplet. Of no strange blooms of the sea shall it be wrought, but, at your will, of roses or the small *fior-da-lisa*."

"He who loves best the sea, as I, loves best the rose," replied Ilaria, smiling. "While he who climbs the height adores the lily."

She glanced, as she spoke, at Neri.

Violetta quickly finished her wreath of eglantine, rose,

sweeping a curtsy, and dropped it lightly on Ilaria's forehead, which it became extremely well.

"Why fear we ghosts in this radiant air?" laughed she.

"Perhaps we are ghosts ourselves," suggested Ilaria—"phantoms of those ancient folk who lived here once."

"No phantom heart beats in my bosom," said the Cavaliere.

And a look of meaning—or so Neri felt—passed between them.

"Fair phantom, let us tread a measure," pleaded Violetta. "What was this green level made for, if not for the beating of gentle feet?"

"And when the measure is over," said Neri in an undertone as they rose, "perhaps the Countess Ilaria will graciously vouchsafe me a moment?"

She signed assent, wide-smiling; but he could see her eyelids flutter and her breath. The measure finished, the Cavaliere at once proposed a new diversion, from which neither could escape; and time wore on, while the light grew more intense and the sky burned deeper blue. Ill at ease, Neri withdrew from the pastimes at last, and climbed the hill behind the ampitheatre. He was displeased. Ilaria, he was sure, shrank from the Cavaliere; yet was there not some bond between them?

The hill was richly draped in ferns and swaying vines. He pushed aside idly a mass of ivy; a passage opened behind, deep-vaulted, paved with broken fragments of mosaic. Stalactites dripped from the roof, through the verdure of thick maidenhair fern. The gloom looked grateful. Neri stepped within, and looking out on the blue day from the waving green framework, saw Ilaria and the Cavaliere approaching, engaged in eager talk. She was flushed, and bore herself haughtily.

Neri stepped quietly out into the light, unnoticed by the Cavaliere. Ilaria evidently saw him at once. She paused, and dismissed the other, regardless of his somewhat insistent protest. With half-ironic salutation, he turned down the hill. Whether or no he had caught sight of Neri as he went was difficult to say.

Ilaria came toward the grotto, trailing her draperies, her forehead troubled and sad beneath the gay chaplet.

"The sun is hot—one craves shelter," said she lightly, but a little tremulously.

Neri, without replying, lifted the ivy-twine, and by gesture invited her to enter. They stood in the dusky cool, speechless, hidden each from the other till sight cleared from the glare of the day. He was helplessly unable to break the silence. Fear, joy, desire, doubt, were tossing him. The breath came fast.

She raised her arms and caught her throat, as Giovanna had described.

"How cool it is here! How sweet!" she said. "When I was a little girl"—and she glanced at him half shyly—"you would never take me to your grotto."

"Ah, but this grotto"—he tried to speak as lightly as she—"we have found together."

"Together!" she reflected, looking away from him. "It is a word we have not often had occasion to use, you and I."

"Henceforth, we might use it constantly"—the sentence was on his lips, but he held it back.

Ilaria waited, her hand pressed to her side, her look one half of dread. As he kept silence she sighed, almost, it would seem, with relief.

"I wish to explore the cave," she said suddenly. "Follow me if you like," and started with quick step into the darkness.

"Take care! Take care, Lariella," cried Neri, using unconsciously the childish name forgotten for long years.

He hurried after her, terror-stricken, he knew not why, but she kept in advance, moving swiftly and lightly over the damp, uneven pavement. For a few steps the dusk deepened; then a sudden light, shining from a crack in the vaulting, revealed in startling fashion a great blackness, by the side of which gleamed something weirdly white. Ilaria screamed, stumbled. The passage, widening beneath their feet, broke downward into a pool of the waters of Styx. A lost stair had betrayed her.

Neri, speeding forward, caught her garments, drew her back. She staggered, yielded to his arms. They leaned

together against the side of the grotto. The earth fell away a little at the shock, revealing in the uncertain light the white figure of a woman.

"The White Lady!" cried both together under their breath.

She stood still, half embedded in the rocky cavity, whither some force had in past ages carried her from her old position; for she had evidently presided over the Piscina or the bath of some rich Roman lord, who rejoiced in her Greek fairness. The face was free; but soil and mould had given it a half-sinister expression. The limbs, so far as visible—and the earth in falling had left one white side of the body wholly bare—were perfect.

Ilaria struggled to free herself from Neri's hold, and sank, half fainting, at the statue's base.

"The peril is over," said Neri, and echoes filled the whole cavern with murmuring. "Dear, do not be afraid! Look at me!"

As her head drooped, he knelt beside her, half distraught, and rubbed her wrists and forehead with water from the pool.

She opened her eyes presently, and smiled at him, as a child might.

"Fonte Gaia!" she whispered.

The words had been in his own mind.

Lifting her hand, she touched and stroked the marble, and awe grew in her eyes.

"Feel," she said; "this is no marble! Why, it is very flesh, though turned to stone!" And she shuddered.

"Only a statue, sweet," he answered soothingly. "Around Naples, they say, the earth is full of such."

"It is the White Lady." She had risen now, and regained her self-control—spoke, indeed, with unwonted dignity and calm. "It is the White Lady," she repeated; "but you know you have never consented to her spells. She rules here in the dusk. How you tremble! There is no need—sunlight, for you, is but a few paces away. See, I will go with you to the entrance of the grotto."

In effect, a strange trembling had seized upon him; he

stood as if unable to leave the spot. But she was looking on his face with anxious eyes.

"Doubtless," he said at last, and despised himself as he spoke, "you would prefer other company than mine, in the presence of your White Lady."

She raised her hands to her throat again, and laughed, a laugh which the vaults re-echoed as a sob.

"Forgive, forgive! I am cruel!" cried Neri. "I know not what I say!"

"You are overheated," she said. "Bathe your brows, as you bathed mine. 'Tis true, I did not find the touch all-cooling."

"The waters of Lethe!" said Neri, very slowly. "Shall I bathe my brows in them, indeed? Already, simply standing by them, I think I have forgotten many things. I have a better thought. Will you drink of them with me, Ilaria? It would not be the first time we have drunk of the same cup in the presence of Venus."

Was he mistaken? Or, in the glimmering light, did he see the shadow of disappointment upon her lovely face?

"Now," said she very quietly, "having said so much, you must say more."

Yes; the time for metaphors was passed. He raised his head.

"I am aware," said he, "of your knowledge concerning the proposition for our union. Will you seal your betrothal with me, now, and here?"

"Say you this of your own free will?" she asked, leaning her hand heavily upon the statue.

"Free?" he cried. "Who is free? Where? Ghostly powers, fates from ancient days, drive us of flesh and blood whither they will. I wait my answer."

"Have you forgot, . . . but it is not for me to remind you!" began Ilaria; then, with sudden change, her reluctance of manner vanished. "We are among the shadows," she sighed, "where Proserpina should be at home. The world of sun is far! Yes, I will be your bride. Yes, I will drink with you. But first"—she gathered a little water in her hands, and sprinkled it at the feet of the statue—"first, a libation to Venus!"

"To our happy wedding!" said Neri, catching his breath.

"To our wedding!" repeated Ilaria. "May she leave her living grave to come to it!"

"We have no cup," said he, repressing his wonder at her strange bearing.

But she, stooping swiftly again, gathered water once more in the hollow of her two palms, and raised them to his face.

"Drink!" she cried eagerly—"drink, while yet we dare!"

He stooped to the soft hands that pressed his mouth, but before his lips had touched the water, a cry rang through the grotto:

"Messer Raniero! Raniero dei Pagliaresi! A messenger from Rome!"

From Rome!

"I am here!" he called.

And Ilaria, throwing her hands outward, dashed the water in the statue's face.

Three men came through the passage; first of the three, Andrea Vanni.

"Forgive, if we intrude," said the Cavaliere; he was white with rage, but courteous. "This gentleman insisted that we seek your presence."

"I thank you for your intrusion," said Neri.

He took the offered scroll from the outstretched hand of Messer Andrea, who looked at him strangely; stepped where the sun-ray fell full on the parchment, and read:

"Neri, my brother," wrote Barduccio, "dear, in Christ and in the holy memory——"

Neri, raising his head, shaded his eyes, as one dazzled.

"This cave," said he, in bewildered accents, "is full of azure light."

He bent again to the letter.

"To-day, about the hour of Sext," it ran, "our mother, giving up her bodily life for Holy Church, as she had prayed to do, passed to that peaceful sea, Eternal God. The body shall lie in the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, whither Stefano is even now bearing it, until Tuesday

evening. Come, then, and gaze once more on the face that still shines, as it were the face of an angel. Come, and rejoice with us, who rejoice with her even while we mourn for her! We, orphans, who long inexpressibly for your presence, salute you. Oh, come swiftly! In the Name of Christ, farewell!"

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"The messenger, being unable to find you, sought me out," said Messer Andrea. He had been scrutinizing the scene gravely, curiously. "I fortunately surmised where you should be found. If we depart immediately——"

"I am ready," said Neri quietly.

Ilaria, stealing close, took the parchment from his unheeding grasp, and read it at a glance.

"She has conquered: so best," said she, also very quiet, and speaking to no one present, but turning to the statue in the wall.

"You are leaving us, messere?" asked the Cavaliere, with ill-concealed triumph.

Neri bowed.

"I am called home," said he; "I have been long away." Though fully master of himself, he was speaking as one in a dream. "With your permission, I will ride the horse that brought me hither."

His eyes, wandering for an instant, encountered Ilaria. He hesitated, gazing at her as a man summoned to the field where death may wait gazes at a child clinging to his knee. But she had stepped to the side of the Master of the Forests, who had now also entered the grotto.

"During the absence of my cousin," she said with gentle dignity, "I will, with his approval, place myself under the protection of this gentleman."

Then the Cavaliere forgot himself; for with an angry gesture he pressed past the elder gentleman, and forced his way to her side. Ilaria looked him full in the face with an expression of undisguised abhorrence.

"The spell of Venus is broken," said she haughtily, and taking the rose-wreath from her head, she flung it in the mire. Neri, turning, saw her in the sun-ray, her face uplifted

to the blue of the sky that shone, dark with its light, through the narrow cleft in the roof of the grotto.

"Farewell, and hail!" he whispered; then, turning his eyes to the whole group, "I go from the presence of life which is fraught with death, to the presence of death which is life," he said clearly. A moment, and they heard his horse's feet thundering on the road to Rome.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE

When Neri reached the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, faint promise of dawn was already in the sky. The journey behind him was a heart-beat which had held unheeded the changes of the hours.

The church loomed dark, save for one guiding star—the window of the chapel of St. Dominic. He pushed back the heavy leathern curtains of the porch, and made his way to the gleam. The columned dusk was filled with unfamiliar fragrance, which grew stronger as he approached.

Before the altar in the little chapel lay that he sought. A figure knelt between the high lights at the head of the bier; it was Stefano Maconi. He rose at Neri's step, and turning with the look of one who has just received the Sacrament, advanced in silence, holding out his hands. The two friends embraced gravely; and Stefano, still holding Neri's hand, led him to the head of the bier. They knelt together for a moment; then Stefano rose, having first devoutly kissed the hem of the old frayed mantle which they had both seen her mend a hundred times. He rested his hand heavily, lovingly, for an instant upon Neri's shoulder, and withdrew, still wordless, leaving to his brother the most precious privilege within his power to grant—the honour of the watch.

Was this death? It was more like life! The holy body of Catherine lay with hands lightly folded over the crucifix. That delicate fragrance which Neri had perceived on entering the church rose and fell in the chapel; it seemed no

fragrance from the fields of earth. The countenance was a surpassing peace. Here was more than that removal of all signs of fret and turmoil, which, in itself, gives so often a noble calm to the faces of the newly dead; a surprised joy, exceeding all joys known on earth, was in this stillness. Catherine looked very virginal; her poor tortured body was grown young with an immortal youth.

But Neri did not note these things at first. He knelt, his head bowed over the folds of her mantle, rapt in the silence of eternity. Slowly the feeling suppressed during those hours of travel rose uncontrolled. His body could make no sign, but his soul was sobbing. He knelt, without thought, without light—blank, dull, lost in the abyss of an anguish that had engulfed the world. The wish that he might die of sorrow came in one conscious thrill, and vanished into the world of pain.

By some slight motion, it chanced at last that his forehead touched the dead hand. Cold as death, it was yet soft and flexible as life. The touch brought promise of healing, for it brought the gift of tears. They dropped, hot and slow, upon the bier.

"My mother, my mother! The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!" he cried.

She had left him! From those lips he should never receive a blessing now! They were still unreconciled—she had died alienated from him! And while she lay in her agony, how had he been engaged? Thought recoiled in horror from the thing he knew. But nothing could ever undo that knowledge. It would go with him to his death—nay, there was no escaping it in all eternity to come.

"Circumdederunt me dolores mortis: et pericula infernis invenerunt me."

He had long disappointed her profoundly, that he knew. Since Avignon days, a little cold wind had crept now and again through the sunshine of their affection. It had been given to him, as perhaps to none other, to understand, not only her tender heart, but also her deep and lofty mind. He had shared her high vision of a Church that should be for

the healing of the nations. Yet that chilly breath of doubt had numbed his energies against his will. He had always failed at the crisis. He had sought strength when he should have given it, and instead of support had offered her a carping need. Oh, he had grieved her! With all his efforts, he had deepened, not lightened, that tragedy of solitude in which her later years were passed.

* * * * *

"De profuudis clamavi ad te, Domine! Domine, exaudi vocem meam!"

* * * * *

But she — this was no hour for self-deception — had she not sometimes failed him also? Condemned when she should have soothed—misjudged, misread? Had he been to blame after all for that confusion of mind, his unsought birthright, so alien to her clear nature? With the question came in blinding flash the memory of a wild day of storm, of an hour in the grotto of Venus. While Catherine lay dying, he had been on the point of mortal sin!

Mortal sin! He knew it now—had known it all along. Vanished for ever the delusion, dictated by hurt feeling and smarting pride, that Catherine and righteousness could be served in promoting the peace of the Church by least deflection from the narrow track of strict integrity; vanished the sophisms of De Frontaigne. His love for Ilaria was no sin, he trusted; but no subtle doubts concerning the merits of one's cause could allow an honest spirit to change sides, to desert his party, under the stress of a personal motive—that way lay treachery. The contemplated marriage with his cousin violated alike the deepest instincts of honesty of mind and purity of heart.

Sin! He faced the thought amazed. With all his tendency to vague self-accusation, actual sin—crass, crude, certain—was something that he had always found difficulty in discovering in himself. Now confusion grew less as darkness deepened.

He lifted his head, and beheld for the first time the strong, angelic face of Catherine, revealed in the blended light of the tapers and the quickening dawn. That moral beauty which

had drawn his youth, which through all aberrations had controlled his manhood, lay visibly before him in whitest peace. And from that sight, meeting the anguished sense of guilt within, arose the second gift of healing to the penitent—the gift of prayer.

"Miserere, Domine! Holy Catherine, pray for me!" The words burst from his tongue.

"Si iniquitates observaris, domine, domine quis sustinevet ?"

* * * * *

"Quid sum miser tunc dicturus,
Quem patronum rogaturus,
Cum vix justus sit securus ?

Rex tremendæ majestatis,
Qui salvandos salvas gratis,
Salve me, fons pietatis !"

* * * * *

While at Naples he had maintained the forms of devotion, but hardly more. Yet the discipline of six years had not been lost. And now, as he knelt, he felt as never before the desperate necessity of prayer—that sharp agony that compels, that beatifies, that pierces the sheath of the soul, and sets it free.

"Tribulationem et dolorem inveni : et nomen domini invocavi :
O Domine, libera animam meam !"

The soul of the race within him pleaded for its heritage. Broken, tumultous words of psalms and hymns, the ever-surging tide of the world's supplications, flooded his spirit. They bore him onward till power came upon him and the will was nerved, and it was granted him, a living soul, to reveal the most intimate secrets of shame and love and desire to the Great Soul, to the unseen God. And with the attainment of that power came assuaging of intolerable thirst. The wayfarer had reached his home.

* * * * *

Fra Raimondo had seen the face of Catherine transformed into the face of Christ. And it befel now that Neri, gazing on her peace, forgot it utterly. The Divine Companion—

He who had walked beside Catherine in her narrow cell, who had solved her every doubt, who had strengthened her hands to war and her fingers to fight—came now to her disciple's side. Through her whom he had wronged and through whom he had suffered, he came into the fellowship of the Perfect Friend.

"Convertere, anima mea, in requiem tuam : quia Dominus beneficet tibi.
Quia eripuit animam meam de morte, oculos meos a lacrimis, pedes meos de lapsu.
Placebo domino in regionum vivorum."

And now there was no longer need or possibility of conscious prayer. As Catherine herself had written: "The soul rises above herself, and with angelic mind unites herself with God by force of love, and sees and knows with the light of thought, and clothes herself with truth. She is made the sister of angels, she abides with her Bridegroom on the table of crucified desire, rejoicing to seek the honour of God and the salvation of souls, since well she sees that for this end the Eternal Bridegroom ran to the shameful death of the Cross."

He had lost sense of time and place. His spirit lay once more on sun-steeped rocks under the wide azure of Provence. For, again, as in that great hour on the summit of Mount Ventoux, the illusion of separateness had vanished. Again, released from himself, he was one breath of an undivided life. But the consciousness in which he was lost and found was wider than before. Then he had entered into the lower mystery—union with spiritual life transcending nature, ye manifest chiefly in the natural world. But how partial tc this clearer insight appeared the sense of unity then attained ! With it had gone a pitying revulsion from common men, and from all human forms and institutions. The thought of the struggle of the multitude had been an annoying intrusion on his exalted calm. He had longed impatiently to escape that unlovely world of compromise, so to realize his own individuality unfettered, and alone to seek the uncontaminate truth not found in the abodes of men. He knew a greater unity to-day, for in this hour of his humiliation and anguish he was

one with his brethren at last. This higher mystery could, he perceived, be entered not on lines of thought, but on lines of suffering only. Sin and shame were the path that had brought him to the great initiation. Great, indeed! For, one with humanity, he knew himself one in a new sense with Deity. In disgrace, in contention, in compromise, in all pitiful forms of human aspiration, in all shameful forms of human failure, in death as in life—yes, in sin itself, he discerned the present God. And if present, then redeeming! What was that strange aversion to the Cross which had seized him on the Windy Hill? Why, the Cross rose in the very centre of the universe of true being; only at its foot was the vision he had longed for. In the noonday darkness that overshadows the Mystery of Redemption, the stars shone forth, the secrets of God's glory were revealed.

The Church dead? Christianity a mere episode in religious history, discredited by a larger faith? He, who had sinned, knew better! No man had ever ascended to heaven by way of Mount Ventoux—by any way upward from finite level. Only the Eternal Son of Man Who is in heaven, being lifted up, could draw all men unto Him. Denied for ever by Hebrews as by Romans, by His Church as by the world, God, the Eternal Redeemer, stooped for ever from His unstained glory to the depths and abyss of moral being—was born of sinful humanity, subjected to the felon's death. By sacrifice, involved in the first impulse of creation, consummated on Mount Calvary, continued on the altars of Christendom, God fulfilled His own infinitude. Where love repentant meets Love sacrificial, and, meeting, is transformed into its likeness, there is the Church of God! No righteous society, such as he had longed in vain, sought in vain to discover, but humanity in process of redemption.

"Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis!

* * * * *

O Crux Ave, Spes Unica!"

The words pealed through his soul, as if Catherine's voice were singing them, as he had often heard it on Good Friday. He clung to them with passionate exultation, finding

therein the clue to the labyrinth of life. What gladness the departing spirit had imprinted on her dear forehead! It had indeed been granted her in a new way to lay down her life in the garden of Holy Church. In the startling clearness often brought by death, Neri saw that life from the beginning. She had given her all to the Church—her courage, her patience, her audacity, her constancy; the generous faith in men won out of natural intolerance, the brave acceptance of conditions most alien to temperament and natural desire. And she had been racked by the sins of the Church more fiercely far than he, her disciple—seeing in the object of her limitless devotion one not all-glorious with holiness, but scarred, darkened, and unclean. Her pain had expressed itself, not in desertion, but in service; to expiate, not to repudiate, had been her instinct. The Lord had accepted her petition; the Church that had mystically given her birth had martyred her, and would now for ever be sustained and inspired by her great spirit.

"Requiem eternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis!"

In ecstasy of reverent love he bent his lips over her hand. And now he found him strong to contemplate that shadow between his soul and hers, never to be dispelled on earth. O cruel Death! breaking off in the midst the ever-unfinished story of human hearts, opposing harsh denial to the imperious craving for wholeness, completeness! In love alone we rest, yet rest in love is ever forbidden; in love we infer by deepest necessity of our being the absolute, the unlimited, yet as nowhere else encounter, by the condition of our mortality, the relative and the unsatisfied! But the very pathos of it all, the failure of love's story here, is, to the logical heart not wholly pessimist, sure pledge of its fulfilment hereafter. So Neri learned by the side of the beloved dead against whom he had sinned, through whom he had so cruelly suffered. "I will, indeed, give you my blessing, but not now," she had said. In other worlds, in other lives! He would go softly all his earthly days, in earnest expectation. "I am content"—it had been the last phrase heard from her lips—"for I perceive that nothing happens without

mystery." He repeated the words solemnly ; to the end of his life he was to use them in private devotion as an antiphon, enclosing within them his supplications and his praises.

He lifted his eyes. On the dead face rested a light, clearer, purer, than the tapers' gleam. The sun had risen. Neri became aware that someone was kneeling by his side. It was Alessia, supporting with filial tenderness the bowed and shaken figure of old Monna Lapa. Gabriele de Piccolomini, with his young son, was kneeling on the other side. Stefano had returned : he, too, knelt opposite Neri. One by one, silently, the Famiglia stole in, till the little chapel was full. There was no sound of weeping. Even Monna Lapa bent, hushed and still, beneath her heavy veil. On the faces shone that look of mystic gladness seen only on the further side of the Land of Tears. With some the look was bright, with others dim ; but it was visible in them all, even the lowest and least holy. The countenance of Barduccio Canigiani in particular glowed with an uplifted peace like that on the face of Catherine ; already he seemed one of the angelic hierarchy. And now Master John III., standing by the Altar immediately above the holy body, began the Office of the Mass.

Yes—they were there—the household of her disciples. They who had grieved her, and failed, and disappointed—who had been unworthy to rise to the height of her great desire, who had all but betrayed the trust she gave. But they had heard her call, had followed, and had loved. They knelt there, sheep unshepherded, helpless children, weak hearts and sinful, who had received the sharpest blow that earth could give. Without, the foes of the Church were raging against her, while those of the household divided the spoil. She was gone, who alone in these storms had been their protector and their guide. They were left desolate in the wilderness. And this was to one and all a Eucharist indeed !

"Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro," chanted Master John.

"Dignum et justum est," returned the people.

And Neri, kneeling tremulous, made his Eucharist with

the rest. Schism rent the garments of the Church, corruption stained her. Yet "She hath in herself," as God had said to Catherine, "such life that no man shall slay her." In scenes like these, repeated through the ages, in the transfiguration of death into victory, of penitence into atonement, she was for ever one with her Lord in the never-ending work of salvation. Out of the very heart of her shame was born her redemption ; sinful and false, she was for ever saved by the sacrifice of her children. The answer to his fears lest the Body of Christ be but an empty phrase, was not only in the dead form that lay before him : it was also in the living worshippers, on whom in their weakness a portion of her spirit had descended. For He who stoops to the Cross for ever, for ever rising from the dead, summons His faithful to union with Him : "Gather My saints together unto Me, they who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice." And in all ages they obey the call. Thus man was one with God in power, since God had made Him one with man, in weakness and in shame.

"Hostiam puram, Hostiam sanctam, Hostiam immaculatam," murmured Master John. "Panem sanctam vitæ eternæ, et calicem salutis perpetuæ."

* * * * *

The mass was over, but the household of faith lingered long. "Holy Catherine, pray for us," they were sighing—canonizing her already in their love, assured that she could not forget in Paradise those whom she had cherished on earth. Nor did they pray for themselves only or chiefly, for her spirit had become their own. A passion of intercession was set free in the little chapel : and to Neri came a longing thus to pray without ceasing, an assurance that the force which makes for salvation was working through his soul. "Thou shalt hang beside thy Lord all thy life long on the cross of holy desire," Catherine had once said to him. In such desire he was one with her at last ! "Holy Catherine, pray for the Church ! Holy Catherine, pray for Ilaria !" he cried. He could think now of that beloved in perfect calm ; his tenderness, never so compelling, had been purified from taint of ill. For he had come in that hour to

the Jerusalem that was above, to the spirits of just men made perfect.

"Put off, O Jerusalem, the garments of thy mourning and affliction," he exulted, "for God shall show thy brightness unto every country under heaven. Arise and stand on high. Look about thee to the east, and behold the joy that cometh unto thee from God. So thy sons come, whom thou sentest away. They come, gathered together from the east to the west by the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the glory of God. For thy name shall be called of God for ever, the peace of righteousness, and the glory of God's worship. For God shall lead Israel with joy in the light of His glory, with the mercy and righteousness that cometh from Him."

CHAPTER XII

A MESSAGE

SILENTLY, one by one, the Famiglia dispersed at last into the dusky church; and Stefano, motioning Barduccio to take the watch, led Neri into the outer air. The two friends wandered with wordless accord into the Pantheon that rose close by, and stood beneath the great dome looking upward. As on that other May-day of the Barefoot Procession—now a year ago—the sky, seen through the open orifice, was tenderest blue; but soft grey vapours, drifting past, dimmed the pure colour.

"My brother, were you here?" asked Neri. Speech was difficult, as after days of retreat; his voice seemed to himself to come from afar.

"I was here," said Stefano in the same undertones. "I arrived a week before she passed from this light; and like all who were by her side," he said, looking into the blue fire above, "I may say, 'Vidi Arcana Dei.'"

"I am glad in your gladness," Neri murmured. "Also I give thanks for her that she was not denied the consolation of your presence."

A spasm passed over Stefano's features.

"But I had grieved her!" he cried. "I had lingered in Siena, at my mother's wish, for other reasons, good then—how trivial now! She had written beseeching me to hasten. I loitered still. 'When will you come, Stefano? Oh, come soon!' she wrote in her last letter. Can I ever forget?"

"Perhaps not on earth; yet grieve not overmuch, for she has reached that sea of peace, Eternal God," said Neri.

Stefano assented.

"Also," he said, "it was Barduccio who was deepest in her intimacy of late—deeper, I think, than thou or I. And he was by her side. Not even Fra Raimondo, for whom she greatly longed, could have given her, I think, such comfort."

"Stefano!"—Neri seized his friend's hands with a sudden gesture—"I have somewhat to tell thee. This very night our Mother has wrought a great marvel, the greatest, I believe verily, that ever she did work in her life; for she has given me strength to bear my confusion of mind."

Stefano smiled at him without surprise.

"Thou wilt then be ready," said he, "to receive the message which she left thee."

A message!

Neri had prepared himself for long silence to last till he be done with time. He had felt himself strong to wait, patient and still, till the light of the eternal morning. Now it appeared that he was not to wait uncomforted. Into that silence he was to carry her last word, her thought for him.

"Tell me first," he said, impelled, he scarce knew why, to defer the sacred moment, "was all peace at the last?"

Stefano shook his head.

"She had been full of thoughts of love for us, of last words, last commands." His voice choked with sobs for a moment. "Ah, how unspeakably precious! It is my intention to write, and at once, a full account of every word she said, and of all details of her glorious passage. But on the Sunday, after she had received extreme unction at the hands of the Abbot of St. Antimo, there appeared a change awesome to behold; we perceived that she was in terrible conflict with the powers of darkness. It was as if she listened to some accusing voice; and many times she raised her arm and cried, 'Peccavi!' Then at last, very clear, as answering the accuser, she cried, 'Never vainglory, but the true glory of Christ crucified!' And having so spoken, her countenance changed suddenly, and from being dark and troubled, shone with such beautiful serenity that it was joy only to look on her. Her eyes, almost invisible before, so sunken

were they, kindled, as it were, and became bright and resplendent. It was as if she had come forth out of some dark abyss. She was lying on the bosom of Alessia; we, gazing, thought for the moment that she was delivered from her infirmity. Alas, it was not so; yet from that moment all was joy. 'Hold this for certain, my sweetest and dearest children,' she said, with such tenderness that our hearts clave asunder, 'that when I depart out of this body I shall truly have consumed and given my life in the Church and for the Church, which thing is a most singular favour. Let not this make you sorrowful; rejoice rather, and be exceeding glad.' And so, praying for us, she signed and blessed us, blessing especially those who were not present in the flesh. It was in the words of Christ that she breathed forth her soul. 'Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit,' and the time was the hour of Sext."

Neri was weeping silently.

"Thanks be to God!" said he.

"Surely we may believe," Stefano added, "that she has received the crimson rose of martyrdom in a new way, and that her brows are wreathed therewith in the paradise of God.

* * * * *

"And now," asked Neri after a moment, "the message of which you spoke?"

"Light," replied Stefano, "concerning the life of each of us seemed to irradiate her soul. Her thoughts were ever for her children—not one was forgotten. My brother, what she said will seem strange to thee, perchance: I do not know. On me also"—Stefano's eyes were fixed on the azure vault above—"she laid a last injunction, hard to the natural man. Yet, please God, I shall obey it, for I know, having beheld her face, that the Spirit of God was with her in that hour."

Neri waited, his head bent in reverence, and the shadow of wings swept past the sunlit space on the pavement.

"'Speak to your brother Neri,'" quoted Stefano, very slowly, "'and make known to him that he is called of God to be a hermit. He shall serve God and Holy Church within his

cell in burning tears, in holy, humble, and continual prayer, in crucified desire.'"

Not one bird only, but many, must be fluttering overhead, for the sunny circle was filled with wavering images of flight. Neri lifted up his eyes to the sky. It was a flock of doves passing gently.

"A hermit!" he mused. "Well she knew that it was my longing from childhood. But I ever thought that she would have me, like herself, serve the world by action, abiding in the cell of the heart only."

"Thou wilt not be altogether such a hermit as the Bachellor," smiled Stefano affectionately.

But Neri was not heeding; he had hidden his face.

"It is because she knew me to have failed in the higher task that she has assigned me to the lower." He sighed. "'Tis true—how true only my own spirit knows!—in the world I have ever been worsted. She has shown grace to my weakness."

He spoke sorrowfully and in humility, but there was nothing bitter in his face or voice.

"I think not so." Stefano, on his side, was speaking with accents of a new authority. "Rather, this message is a sign that she trusted thee greatly. Thou shalt still be, more than if thou didst stay in the world, our comfort and our great support. It shall be thine to justify our Mother's perpetual faith that the 'servants of God,' who lead in solitude the life of prayer, are, indeed, the strength of the Church."

"Thou fearest not that I shall become a self-seeker in that life?" asked Neri.

Stefano looked at his friend with loving trust.

"Thou couldest not if thou wouldest," he answered; and added thoughtfully: "Great is the need to-day of those who sit at the Master's feet like Mary, while others labour in the battlefield. For while to labour is to pray, it is not all of prayer; sad days will come to the Church if ever men so deem."

"The way of the contemplative is a way beset with perils," Neri mused.

"And therefore never to be abandoned," cried Stefano, "by pilgrim feet. The strength of the Church Militant is in her practice of the presence of God, and they who in bewildered days keep clear the vision of His holy will are necessary to her life and to her saving power. But it needs a spirit strong and free to tread this path. Our Mother, when she showed it thee, did trust thee greatly."

"I am not sure," said Neri, smiling. "Perhaps she trusted me—perhaps she thought me weak. I shall not know till I, too, pass from this light which is darkness. It does not matter." His eyes were fixed on the dazzling circle which blotted from sight all details of the temple in which they stood. "Whichever it was, I shall obey," he said.

And again, as in the Chapel of Saint Dominic, the imperious necessity of prayer overflowed his being. He was called to action more concentrated, more difficult, than any he had ever known: none the less possible, none the less glorious.

"Pray for me, Stefano," he said to his friend solemnly, "that my life may be one act of intercession. And thou—what shalt thou do?" he asked presently.

"It was on me, unworthy, that she laid her commands last of all," said Stefano. "For she turned and pointed with her finger, and said: 'As to you, I desire you on the part of God, and in the name of holy obedience, to enter into the Order of Carthusians, for it is there that God would have you to be, and it is there He calls you.' I suppose," he added, with a touch of his old rueful *naïveté*, "that her choice of the Carthusian Order was because she knew that there, more than elsewhere, I should have help in bridling my tongue."

"Thou a monk, I a hermit," mused Neri. "It had seemed strange in the old days."

"Ay," Stefano assented simply. "But it does not seem strange now. When she spoke these words, I had never so much as thought of that, or any other order. Ever she urged me to cut and not merely loosen the cords that bound me to the world. But her full meaning she would never tell. When now she spoke at last a great light dawned. I

avow to thee, my brother, that these her words did reveal to me the vocation which I now know can alone satisfy my need."

And Neri, looking at his friend, saw the old careless, joyous beauty dignified and transformed by a new consecration; the face of the noble, while losing nothing in manliness and aristocratic charm, had become by insensible degrees the face of the Religious.

"I am sent," said a voice near by, "to say that you are needed at the church."

It was Andrea Vanni. He, too, like the others, had the look of one who had been in the secret places of the Most High.

"I have seen the picture of my life!" he broke forth, as they walked back quickly. "It is the picture of redemption accomplished, even as the masters of old saw it, but with a difference. When it is painted I will give it to you, my Neri."

But even as he spoke he checked himself, and looked at his comrade with affection, yet with some suspicion.

"It will ill suit the Court of Queen Giovanna," he added.

"Neither the picture nor I," said Neri serenely, "shall live at that Court."

The other looked his inquiry, but Neri vouchsafed no more.

Despite the still early hour, a crowd was gathered, increasing every moment, before the door of the church. The friends entered by a private way, and looking out through an iron screen that shielded the Chapel of Saint Dominic from the body of the building, beheld the people of Rome surging, as in great waves, toward the Holy Place. Cardinals and prelates were there, nobles and gentles, but chiefly that great populace which she had loved. With flowing tears they came, with eager cries of love and devotion, bearing their manifold infirmities, seen or unseen, to the spot where that still body lay, in rest so gentle. The stormy needs of earth could not, as it seemed, relinquish their hold on her.

Members of the Famiglia, standing on guard, admitted the crowd cautiously, a few at a time; mourning, loving, very triumphant, they rushed forward to kiss the feet, the garment. A common sorrow in loss, a common rapture in possession, swayed the whole Roman people. Their Saint was gone from their sight, but she was theirs for ever! Neri and Stefano took station by the head of the bier, and through the long day the scene continued. Miracles were frequent; stories of conversion ran like wild-fire through the crowd. Visions, in which she appeared to her own to heal or bless, to strangers to reveal or convert, were narrated on all sides. The priests of the Famiglia, taking advantage, as in duty bound, of this spiritual opportunity, were preaching all over Rome, and reaping rich harvests; only in Santa Maria itself, the tumult of the people coming and going made words inaudible, and Master John, crying in a loud voice that the Holy Maid had no need of preaching, for she preached sufficiently herself, came down from the pulpit he had ascended. The church, indeed, was full of sobbing prayer.

"Holy Catherine, pray for us! Holy Catherine, pray for us!"

The words re-echoed on every side. And Neri, standing on guard, watchful, pitying, a little fearful lest the thronging people tear the Holy Body actually to pieces in their ecstasy of devotion, prayed also, in passionate unity of feeling with these humble worshippers:

"Holy Catherine, pray for the Church! Holy Catherine, pray for Ilaria!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE VEIL OF THE HEART

"A HERMIT!" said Ilaria—she spoke softly, as one in a dream—"a hermit! So it was meant, I think, from the beginning. From the look on your forehead, you have lived already long in your cell, since last we met."

The two were seated in the familiar room of Giovanna's palace. Ilaria, like Neri, had aged in the last five days. A subtle resemblance between the two, evident in childhood, but obscured of late years, played again through all differences in feature and expression.

Neri, leaning his chin on his hand, was looking at her with tenderness undisguised. The reserve which had long marked his bearing was gone as completely as the passion to which he had yielded at their last interview. Ilaria felt his spirit lying open and simple before her, as when he was a child.

"Assuredly it was meant," said he; "but I am very sorrowful, for I see not what was meant for you."

She smiled at him, seeking to reassure.

"If I have guided my life ill, not yours the fault," said she soothingly.

In her, reserve still obtained, yet without a trace of her late perplexing defiance. Asperity had given place to a great gentleness.

"Yet"—Neri was hesitating, flushing—"I am tormented by one thought, that for you it had perhaps been better if—if——" He stammered, reaching out his hands in appeal. "I could not profit by the dispensation of Clement and re-

main true man!" he cried desperately. "But you——" and again he paused.

A flash of her old merriment lit Ilaria's sad eyes. She had once said that she should mock him on her dying bed.

"Why pause?" she asked, arching her brows. "You mean that for us to wed were moral disaster for you, but to me perhaps moral salvation. And that, since my salvation should be dearer to you than your own . . ."

She rose, swept a low reverence, and the two broke together into uncertain laughter. But she was swiftly grave again, though tremulous.

"Dear, do not grieve," she said. "List, for your comfort. 'Tis true I have loved you—love still, and think no shame. But had you consented to become my lover, the man I love had died; for what I love in you is what has held you far."

Her eyes had been raised to his with serious, sweet directness, nor had touch of colour mantled in her cheeks. But now she turned, and moved quickly to the window. When she looked round again, her face was wet with tears; agitation surged visibly beneath the surface of her quietude. She spoke rapidly, clasping and unclasping her long fingers.

"Dread and desire have beaten me hither and thither; great waves have tossed me. On the very morrow of my husband's death, the Queen asked me whom I would wed; your name leaped to my lips; I told her I could take none other. Even as I pronounced it, the dread seized on me, but I said, he is far, he is with his Catherine, the thing can never be. Then, behold! you came, and I knew not what I wished. No! no! I cried; bear me witness that I tried to keep you far! But the spells of Venus are strong. Yet when we stood before her in the dark, I knew—what in one sunset at Rocca D'Orcia, I knew not—that the hour of our bridal should be the hour when my love should die. My love for you—in all my life the only pureness, the one abiding light! And longing and horror wracked me. She is cold, that White Lady—cold, foul, and false—and the gifts she offers turn

to death in the grasp. But it was the other who conquered —your White Lady, and not mine. She was ever a generous enemy, in taking you from me she has restored you, she has given me back my love! Go to your hermitage, Neri. Oh, swiftly, swiftly, go!"

She had been pacing to and fro as she talked, but now she pressed close, looking at him with imploring, piteous eyes, as a child might do. On a sudden she covered her face, dropped into a seat, and broke into wild weeping.

Neri was weeping too. He laid his hand very lightly on her dark hair as she sat bowed before him, and tried to speak, but could not.

"I do not understand!" she cried through her sobs. "I have wished no man ill. Ever I have desired only fairness, and love, and fulness of sweet life. And the beauty I seek is befouled by my seeking, and my love hath stained my beloved, and when I clutch at life, death crumbles within my grasp. I have but turned from the agonizing God upon the Cross I hate to paths where roses bloom. Where has my quest been wrong?"

"Not wrong," he said unsteadily. "Not wrong, I trust."

She looked at him bewildered.

"Did not the Lord make the world and call it very good?" he cried. "Many a contemplative have I known who sought to slay the things of flesh, thinking thereby to attain union with the Divine. I say not that their way is false, but it is not for me, and as I have observed, those dedicated thereto fall into great bitterness. Messer Dante, who found Paradise on the summit of a climb exceeding steep, was lifted therefrom to the Heart of Beatitude. Rememberest thou what he found it? A rose of myriad petals! Love roses, sweet, and have no fear."

"But pluck them not," sighed she.

"'Tis better not," assented Neri, dreaming. "I know little—I walk among shadows—but this I know: We must learn to rejoice without possessing before we shall possess in truth. And for the Cross," he continued, after a moment's pause, gazing as he spoke far away: "O Crux Ave, Spes Unica! In the ancient churches of Rome I have seen that

sign thou hatest, carrying no thought of torture, high in the radiance of the fields of Paradise, studded with jewels, wreathed with blossom, the sign of victory and joy. Thus they see it who lay down their lives for Christ. The way of sacrifice alone leads to the land of life. Ilaria, sweetest, dearest, place thy footsteps in that way. Turn thy face toward that country. There 'wish and fulfilment shall severed be ne'er, nor the thing prayed for fall short of the prayer.' 'Twas a great lover wrote those words. There true love that knows no peril is waiting thee and me."

She caught at the hand still wandering near her hair and drew it piteously to her lips, but made no effort to retain it as Neri drew it away.

"Not for me, the quest of that country," she sighed. "I shall never roam its fields with the Lady Matilda. I am that Proserpina who has lost the Spring. Yet one comfort is left me still—one stay that shall not fail."

"And that?" asked Neri.

She raised her eyes to his with a strange expression.

"What found my brother?" said she.

"Gualtiero!" Neri exclaimed. A shudder seized him. "No, no! You shall not!" he cried roughly. "Do you hear? I too—that fierce longing"—his phrase broke, he turned to the window and swept his hand to the sea with an expressive gesture. "I have seen my Mother in a dream. She has said to me: 'You shall dream no more of the surging waves, but of the heights of eternal peace.' You, too, shall turn deaf ears to the call of that welter of waters. You shall not yield to that crawling weakness—the sin against the Lord and Giver of life."

But Ilaria had interrupted him.

"Oh, my dear, I meant not that," she was saying. "Of the sin or weakness I might reck little, but of the hurt to thee I should reck much. There is that in my heart to thee which shall keep me safe henceforth from what would grieve thee."

"What is it then?" he asked, relieved. "The comfort, the stay of which you spoke?"

A very lovely smile overflowed her features.

"That is my secret," she answered.

He reflected a moment.

"I do not see your life," he said anxiously. "What shall it be, Ilaria? Till that be known to me I shall not seek my cell. Dark days and evil await this excommunicate Court. Giovanna is now doubly right. You cannot remain here without protection."

A gleam of mischief lit her face.

"What would my kinsman suggest?" asked she.

Neri sighed. "Marriage is an honourable estate," he reflected sadly.

"Decorous, dignified; a great safeguard, in theory, to a woman," she said primly. "I having twice made assay thereof should know. But I care not for the third trial, my cousin."

"Yet as wife to that excellent man, the Keeper of the Forests and Waters," said Neri, "you would be safe, whatever storms fall on the kingdom. He is sure to be respected in any turn of political events."

She made a wry face. "His daughters hate me, and his son, to tell the truth, is over-fond," said she.

Neri meditated a moment. It was with effort that he resumed.

"There is another, to whom I have perhaps done scant justice. You need, Ilaria, a husband who shall share with you your love for all that is fair and fine. I ought to rejoice to see you wedded to one who should be lover as well as husband. I have thought at times—and suffered from the thought, to my shame—that your heart was drawn to the Cavaliere di San Michele, though he be not free from faults."

He had kept his face from her, but now, as a sharp cry of repugnance broke from her lips, he faced her suddenly. First he saw her face in a maze; and then, in the silence between them, an ugly perception grew—was beaten down—rose again—and finally conquered.

Ilaria's face, pale and quiet as she had avowed her love for him, was flaming now; her eyes refused to meet his own. Neri became even more crimson than herself; he covered his face with his hands.

"But—Queen Giovanna said——" he stammered.

"You are a guileless diplomat, indeed, to have believed that lady," Ilaria muttered.

Neri lifted his head, and saw her huddled figure. She was watching him sideways.

"I trusted you," he said slowly, sadly. "At times I feared, but ever I trusted."

And now she faced him once more; there was anguish in the eyes.

"You did well," she said, trembling. "Till I came to Naples there were in my life many thoughts and wishes that would have grieved you; there was no hidden deed. My husband, Bernabo, was right—you were the only man he had reason to hate."

A shiver of distaste ran through Neri. She caught it, and reached out appealing hands, averting the face.

"I am no priest, Ilaria," he said very formally. "You are telling me what the ears of the priest should hear."

"I can tell it to you better than to a priest," she sighed humbly. "If you wish I will tell it later to a priest also; but to-day you must know all. After Rocca D'Orcia and my arrival here I know not what spirit possessed me. The news of my poor brother when it came was horror night and day. I must forget; all round me drew and lured, the ocean sang! For one brief hour I thought to find forgetfulness—where others find. But what I sought lay not upon that road. And now"—she was speaking rapidly, having regained a measure of assurance—"you know why I shall not wed. There is but one way for me; you shall lead me thither. Proserpina shall turn Lady of Shadows in very truth, and move veiled through her rose-garden. I will make me nun at Belcaro; so thou—and Catherine—shall be content. Art thou not content?" she asked, after he had been silent for a moment.

"Content, indeed!" he said, rousing himself from deep thought, or rather prayer, "if such deed spring from penitence and shame."

"Penitence? In truth I know not," she rejoined, with a hint of petulance. "I meant no ill. I did but follow my

quest. For shame—I know not either. The shame I have known in my life I have always read in your eyes. You will not understand," she broke out stormily, after a little pause. "But I am glad the thing happened! It showed me once for all that, though I may not walk in your way, I would not have you walk in mine. You wavered toward it of late. Once I should have rejoiced; now my spirit has been full of fear."

"I understand better than you think," said Neri solemnly. "I, too, have sinned; and I believe—though of such thoughts it is wise to say little—that sin is in the world for the sake of the illumination it brings."

"Of sin I know nothing," said Ilaria mournfully; "I apprehend neither the word nor the thing."

"Then, why enter Belcaro?" questioned Neri bewildered.

But she smiled at him, almost happy, almost guileless, once more.

"That," said she, "is connected with my secret."

"I do not understand you," he sighed. "Yet something tells me that what you seek is good. As for your intention, it is the answer to many prayers."

"You do not hate me?" she asked anxiously, creeping a little near, and looking up at him with tremulous lips. "You do not hate me?" she repeated. "You are—pleased with me?"

He clasped her hands gently, and bent over her with his look of an archangel. She knew it was the last farewell.

At that moment a door opened behind them, and Queen Giovanna stood on the threshold. She was robed with unusual splendour, as had been her wont since the excommunication fell; none the less, a gloomy and tragic figure, that struck to the beholder's heart a sense of coming fate.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, seeing the two clinging together. "But this is well—it is very well indeed. I had thought felicitations not in order. It seems thou didst deceive me, pretty one."

The cousins had drawn apart, and Ilaria, for once, was covered with confusion. But Neri had not lost his composed dignity. He spoke quietly:

"My very dear and honoured cousin," he said, "has just

informed me of her intention to take the veil in the convent of Our Lady of the Angels, formerly known as Belcaro, near unto Siena. She will there be under the protection of her kinswoman, Madonna Isa, of the Salimbeni. Your Majesty will perceive, under the circumstances of your Court, the wisdom of this arrangement."

Giovanna's face changed; she looked angrily. Then, having scrutinized the two, she turned to Ilaria.

"Child, how you love this man!" she exclaimed.

"'Tis true," said Ilaria proudly. "I love him, and think no shame!"

"And I," said Neri, "have loved this lady from my earliest youth. I have loved her well and ill. I love her yet; but now it is wholly well."

The Queen gazed at the two, half exasperated, half admiring.

"And you, messere," said she, "may it be permitted to inquire concerning your plans? You have put Monseigneur de Frontaigne in the right; he was assured you would refuse the dispensation."

Neri hesitated to speak; the secret hopes of his soul were not for such ears as Giovanna's; but the Queen, in the pause, looked old, sad, desolate.

"You will perhaps," she said in her most haughty manner, "deign to accede to the request of one, who, though excommunicate, is yet a Queen."

"I, madama," said Neri, filled with a great pity, "intend, so soon as my affairs shall permit, to put on me the holy habit of a hermit, and to retire from the world, in which, truth to tell, I have made somewhat of a sorry failure."

"You have made no failure at all!" cried Ilaria.

"Oh, it matters not," he said to her gravely, gently, with a certain joyousness: "failure is no misfortune, if so be the flame of holy desire be purified thereby."

The Queen had been watching Ilaria.

"My child," she said, "you will make a very graceful nun—for a time at least—since you choose to do so. But your heart will never wear the veil."

"It can know freedom only under the veil, however," Ilaria made answer.

Giovanna gave a deep sigh. Her brows were sombre. Twilight, of a sudden, seemed to fall upon the room.

"Who shall say that your choice is wrong?" she mused. "Strange times and dark are upon us. You leave the falling throne, the monarch excommunicate. Before you is the way of safety and of calm."

"The conflicts which await us are doubtless of different type from those you shall know," rejoined Neri. "Yet is there little peace in the cell while the world is rent with anguish."

She did not hear him; she was gazing absently out of the window at the dusk creeping over the sea.

"In the twilight of my days I am left alone," she murmured.

"As she who loved you and whose words you refused to heed ever told you, you have been very cruel to yourself, madama," said Neri with inexorable compassion.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CROSS OF HOLY DESIRE

It was full summer, and the olives, for reward of their winter faithfulness, wore a faded aspect as of faint survivors among the fresh full green of vines and oaks, when Neri took up his abode on the banks of Arno, a few miles from Florence, in the small commune Agromaggio, which formed part of the parish of San Stefano alle Busche. Perhaps that Florentine strain in the blood, responsible at least in part for the ironic impulse, the over-tortured thought, which had ever perplexed his friends of Siena, had something to do with his choice; certain it is, however, that the name of the parish made delicate appeal to his feelings. He forbore however, characteristically enough, to mention his bit of sentiment to the living Stefano, now a novice in the Carthusian Order, and, if truth be told, a little wistful over the prolonged silence of his friend:

"I had thought to find thee here in Siena," Stefano had written. "It was not permitted to me. I have not only been refused thy presence, but even a brief letter from thee. It seems that God in His benignity wishes to deprive me of the presence of all those with whom I had imagined to find some refreshment, in order that I may have cause to cling to Him the Creator of all more perfectly. By His inestimable mercy, may He grant me the grace to do so manfully."

Not only Stefano, but others of the Famiglia, were, indeed, at this time a little grieved and peplexed by Neri's bearing. He had on his return from Naples exerted him to

the uttermost to console their desolation, till they clung to him with something the same pitiful dependence which they had shown to Catherine. But slowly, among his tender ministrations, an irresistible, imperative need for silence stole over him ; it was a state of mind beyond his power to control, and suddenly there came, as with a message of release, the conviction that here was the Call his spiritual mother had foretold to a life of solitude. He resisted all entreaties to take up his hermit life within easy reach of Siena and his friends' affection :

"My cell would be no hermitage, but rather an inn," he declared laughing. Later, he knew that he should yield to their desires—should crave indeed a natural measure of human fellowship, and assume, like many hermits of his day, a mode of life in which the stern background of ordered intercourse with the unseen should not be inconsistent with scholarly pursuits and helpful relations with his brethren. For the present, speech and letter-writing were not only impossibly irksome—they violated deepest spiritual seeds. He gave them up, and withdrew among the grey soft stillness of the olive-trees, that wove around his cell a silvery veil through which the sky shone near.

The country-folk took his presence as a matter of course, with the sympathetic intuition of their race and time. For holiness was a profession like another in Tuscany, with its special perquisites and rights ; nothing like a hermit to bring blessing to a country-side ! A gentleman, choicely clad, had come up the foot-path among the wheat-fields one June day —a man, not sad exactly, but with a sort of dimness to the face and a winning word for everyone. The peasants had gathered in the farmyard, listening while he made his simple bargain for the abandoned hut above the river-slope. When a few days later the stranger returned in rough grey garb, a Cross hanging by his side, surmise was justified ; messere wished to spend his life in intercourse with Messer Our Lord God. It was all the better for the crops !

Little maids and lads, half-bold, half-shy, ran up now and then and peered into the hut ; he smiled but said no word, and they tiptoed away, making the Sign of the Cross.

Otherwise unmolested, Neri wandered by the river-bank, or sat copying the great work of Catherine, her "Dialogue between God and the Soul," of which Stefano had lent him a precious copy. Many hours of every day, he spent upon his knees, now in the neighbouring oratory of San Luca, now before a shrine which his own hands had erected near the swift-flowing river, now, and most often, within his hut, before the solitary possession saved from his disposal of his property—a picture of dusky blue background, signed with the name of Andrea Vanni. And day by day, the silence sang to him. Dearest perhaps were the early morning hours when impenetrable river-mists blurred out the world, till only the ringing of bells from across the river bore witness that aught but space lay beyond his wheat-fields; but every hour of the hastening day was dear. For Neri, like his mother Catherine, practised not the mysticism of abstraction derived from the Orient, dear to the hermits of Lecceto and to many other medieval contemplatives, but that other mysticism which in the whole world of visible being sees Love made manifest to sense. The earth was to him no finality on the one hand, no illusion on the other, but image or sacrament of the Unseen.

He felt himself sinking steadily into greater exhaustion of body and spirit; how deep it might become, he could not guess. That old illness, in which mental could hardly be discerned from physical disorder, hovered over him during the first years of his hermit life. Yet, though the dull irresolution and inhibition of active power, so long known to him as "confusion of mind," returned to avenge the strain of the past years, the sting of it, since that night of vigil, was departed once for all.

"If I go down into hell, Thou art there also," he murmured, looking calmly into that dark abyss, the terror of his past.

"No pain shall be so much rewarded as weariness of mind and mental tortures," Catherine had once said to him; he now realized that the "reward" was the birth of Faith out of the very heart of darkness. How, save for the last cry on the Cross, could men be sure of the fellowship even

to the uttermost of that Son of God whom only His despair could reveal as perfectly the Son of Man? Should not the disciple follow boldly into the desolation whither Christ led the way? Neri in a great peacefulness awaited the assaults of the Powers of Evil upon his body and soul.

And so, at the point where existence seemed negation and despair, the assurance of reality which he had sought from boyhood with such baffled eagerness, was waiting. Reality? He could not escape it! It lay for him, not in any opening of vision in the heavens to his passive eyes, such as his childhood had craved, but in that whole web of energies which was his life, which interwove his spirit with the world! Frustration, failure, were part of these energies—nay, only when failure was deepest could assurance be clinched, be clear: the quest and the goal were one. Kneeling in the soft hush before the picture of Vanni, Neri covered his face, knowing that all his life long, as Catherine had foretold, he should hang beside his Lord on the Cross of Holy Desire.

Desire, not for personal fulfilment alone: one with the Passion that redeems the world. Neri in his childhood had wished the hermit life for the sake of his own small soul; again and again in recent years he had resisted the old egotistic craving, knowing that for him to yield had been to make the great refusal. Wisely had Catherine strengthened his resolve, and held him in that school of character, the world. But her dying spirit had divined the truth; through years of distasteful training, love in her disciple had been transformed from an impulse—alas! how fleeting!—into the habit of the inmost life. And now, hour by hour, as the noises of the world echoed more faint and far, Neri heard more clearly within him the music of great love for men. He gave thanks in deep humility: his spirit was attuned to Catherine's at last! That great contemplative had, as he knew, been saved from the perils which beset the mystic by her passionate sympathy with her fellows. Her highest experiences had consisted, not in abstraction from the phenomenal world, but in receiving light on the problems of that world, help for its sorrows direct from the

Eternal Mind. If she had bidden her disciple abandon the more distracting forms of external activity, it was not that he might claim a selfish peace, or even withdraw into an isolated realm of religious conflict and aspiration, but that he might realize himself, as never before, one of a great multitude whom his spiritual energy helped to attain the goal of all desire. He was called to action—action at which the flesh quailed, more concentrated, more difficult, than aught his stormiest days had known ; none the less possible, none the less glorious ! In his impassioned meditation, sense grew strained and fine, and Eternity throbbed through Time's silences. Stefano was right. Woe to the Church when such meditations should cease, when the practice of the Presence of God should be forgotten by her children, and Matilda rather than Beatrice be conceived as chief guide of the faithful. He and his comrade contemplatives scattered over Christendom, were helping to preserve for the whole race its most precious treasure, to transmit to ages unborn the consciousness of the Transcendent God.

Outside, the uproar of that battle fought in the dark, in which, of late years, he had loyally borne his part, was, as he knew, still raging. Had he betaken him to craven flight from the tumult, the distress ? Not so ! He was but transferred to another company, that company to which, as to the patriarch of old, it might be given to determine the outcome of the fight ; for Catherine's intense faith in the efficacy of intercession was at last shared by her disciple. The world would always laugh at this faith, and scorn the deluded dreamer who dedicated his best energies to that great ministry ; what knew the world of that spiritual sphere from which the forces which shape the visible universe proceed for ever ? The gift of prayer, first vouchsafed to Neri in fulness as he knelt by her dead body, had proved a permanent possession. From the hermit in his cell power went forth to the wide human need—to Italy, to all whom he held dear, to the Church militant of his own time and of ages yet to be ! The remainder of his earthly days should be none too much for the free full play of his activity of holy desire ! From afar, Neri looked upon the anguish that

had befallen Christendom, an anguish similar in many respects to his own besetting 'confusion of mind.' That bewilderment must for ever, he perceived, attend all mortal struggle. Men must always fight earnestly for what to them appeared the righteous cause, yet the clearer their insight the less, it might be, could they ever know where that cause surely lay. But there was one field of action where the passion for righteousness could work, free from either dogmatism or self-distrust—one only instrument, direct in action, unfailing in result, potent to transform the world into a Divine likeness. The way of prayer was open for ever to an illumined region above our earthly night. Thither his desires darted upward ! Winged flames, presences almost palpable to thought, they sped, they soared, to the Heart of God ! And then ? Thought could follow no further. Yet in the hush the hermit knew, with a knowledge independent of feeling or perception, that human love and longing, entering into the eternal love, quickened in the very centre of God's Being new power to illumine and redeem.

With deep restfulness born of the sense that he had sufficient time in which to pray, Neri set him to ordering his life. Study, writing, had their place. The "Divine Comedy" was a daily companion, and as he read it the poet in his own spirit woke, and sang in many a lovely laud the praises of God and of his spiritual mother. Friendship, too, was not forgotten ; for a brief season the power to serve his fellows on the surface of life had been taken from him, but well he knew that it would return once more, as the ebbing tide of life rose higher. But fellowship with the unseen should be from this time on the deep underlying harmony of existence. Yes, though the keen invading thought should ever, as of old, at the very moment of attainment, pierce and destroy the consciousness of undivided being. None the less faithful should be his holy, humble, and continual prayer.

The effective use of the great instrument within his hands, as of all other instruments, depended, he knew well, on discipline and practice. In that high secret activity, as

in all others, the indubitable peril of formalism is no necessary result of regularity ; nor is it to be avoided by waiting on religious impulse, but rather by faithfulness throughout all fluctuations of feeling to a definite course. Drawing on the instructions given by Catherine out of her rich experience, profiting by the yet riper wisdom of all Catholic ages, Neri shaped for himself a private rule. Acts of penitence, of contemplation, of communion, of intercession, set in a golden chain of endless praise, occupied the swiftly-passing hours. His days flowed smoothly as the Arno at his feet, and, like the Arno, blessed the lands through which they flowed onward to the infinite sea ; and as a man absorbed in thought in the woodlands suddenly becomes aware that on every side the birds are singing, and have been singing long, and, listening, finds even the farthest distances alive with faint sweet answering calls, so Neri, as the years went on, became conscious, through all vicissitudes of depression and exaltation, of the prayers of myriad comrades, known and unknown. For it was given him to hold his part in that hidden music which from the beginning has not ceased to rise from the hearts of the faithful, and which, like the music of the old Greek myth, has secret potency to build, unnoted on earth, the walls of the spiritual city.

THE EPILOGUE

"The perfect soul rejoices more in the differences among men than it would in seeing them all walk in the same way, saying, 'Thanks be to Thee, Eternal Father, that Thou hast many mansions in Thy house.'"

"But thou wilt say to me, 'What is this Food of Angels? I reply: 'It is the Desire of God, which draws to itself the desire which is in the depths of the soul, and they make one thing together.'"

ST. CATHERINE.

THE EPILOGUE

Behind Raniero de' Pagliaresi rose his own city of Siena; but still he sat in his grey hermit garb among grey olive trees. The twilight of his life was near. The little troubled line in the brow was, if anything, more eager than of old, and through the shadows of intellectual experience and maturity that marked his countenance, shone the expectant look of an enduring childhood; yet the whole impression was above all things one of tranquillity and trust. The soft curling hair, snow-white, not very long, lay lightly on the temples. Neri was yet as lovable as in his lovely youth.

A jingle of bells was heard on the road that descended from the city, and presently an excellent grey mule appeared, feeling his careful way from the direction of the Porta Romana. A prelate, on whose finger shone a finely-cut gem, bestrode the scented beast, Years had dealt gently with the Cardinal-bishop, Louis de Frontaigne. His scholarly face, like his figure, had grown fuller and broader in the last quarter century; but still, even on casual acquaintance, one felt a subtle perfection in the man, resulting from the success of the intellect in shaping character to its own choice ends. The Cardinal de Frontaigne had remained loyal during the fierce ecclesiastical struggle to the line of Popes whose cause he had chosen at the time of the Great Schism. Rapid promotion had rewarded his adherence, but that discerning intelligence which served him as conscience had perhaps experienced a faint disgust at the situation. He had in any case withdrawn more and more from active politics, and given himself over to cultivating his fine powers of observa-

tion and taste. The scholarship and art of the rising Renaissance found in him an effective patron; though he had himself produced nothing of distinction, he was at this time one of the notable men in Europe.

His eyes lit with pleasure as he caught sight of Neri, who was sitting, abstractedly gazing out, near the entrance to a deep cave, hollowed, partly by art, partly by nature, in the natural cliff that broke with uneven slopes toward the ravine below. Descending and tethering his beast, de Frontaigne began to clamber up the narrow path toward the cell. The hermit, suddenly perceiving him, sprang to his feet with a start. He looked frail and very thin, but the ivory pallor of his skin had flushed with the same faint tint as of old. He stepped forward eagerly.

"Louis!" he exclaimed. The sweet unchanged vibrations of his voice exorcized the years from memory.

The Cardinal's greeting was of a warmth and deference that would have surprised his intimates, for he was habitually cool of manner.

"You would not answer my letters," he remarked gaily; "and having bombarded your cave citadel for some years with missives of vellum, I decided to carry the assault in person."

"It is true," assented Neri, troubled, "I have seemed very remiss. All complain of it. The power of letter-writing is a gift which our Lord in His grace has been pleased to remove from me."

"It is easy to ascribe our own indolence to a decree of the Almighty," said the Cardinal, with dangerous suavity.

He had, if truth were told, been keenly hurt and finally alarmed by the eremite's obstinate silence, and had finally undertaken the journey from Ferrara to Siena at some personal inconvenience.

Neri's brow contracted; a look of dazed distress gathered in the grey eyes. Louis de Frontaigne was amused to recognise in himself the old remorseful shame which always overtook Neri's friends when they ventured to criticise him.

"Doubtless you had your reasons," he hastened to suggest; "and you need not fear lest you have been forgotten."

"I did not write"—Neri was speaking half to himself,

while the distress faded from his expression—"but I did better. My spirit has held you close and high. Day by day I have commended you to the Sweet Primal Truth. To meet in God's holy Presence is the true fellowship for man."

"Eh? There was a time," smiled the Cardinal, scenting a pleasurable subtlety, "when it was your contention that the holy and secret things of the Most High had no operative existence save as they expressed themselves in terms of sense. On this theory you based your loyalty to the Church, though that institution, as I used to remind you, bore few marks of being related to the Divine Intent."

"While you," Neri smiled back, delighted as of old to join the swift play of thought on impersonal themes instinctive with de Frontaigne—"you, on the other hand, used to contend that the holy thought was entirely unrelated to the visible world, working as it lists in the secret soul of man or Nature, but forfeiting its integrity so soon as it passed from mind to mind, or was translated into outward form."

"*Distinguo*, as your schoolmen say," returned the other. And then, laughing: "But have I travelled hither from Ferrara to discuss theories?"

"And I have not even asked you to sit!" said Neri, laughing too. "Here on this bench I offer to my guests all that I have to share—the outlook over Tuscany."

"'Tis more than I can offer the visitors to my palace," said de Frontaigne, and bent forward, chin on hand, studying the landscape. "A lovely country," he reflected presently—"a land of fine reserves in line and hue, of tender meanings. Those pure distances seek to recreate the earth in likeness of the sky."

"A sky that has stooped to suffer," said Neri, "and that has gained thereby a new quality to its azure. It is the country of my heart," he added. "Here the best of my life has been passed."

"Your hermit years—have they, then, been the best?" asked the other.

"I thought not of those alone," said Neri. "Though I have lived in this grotto for over twenty years, ever since

leaving my first hermitage at Agromaggio. Behind us lies my own town—a quarrelsome spot, a home of passion and strife—yet to us who followed Catherine Benincasa around its streets a holy city. To the right of this cave of mine is that other little cave, where she sought as a child to imitate the holy fathers of Egypt. That snow-flecked purple mountain mass to southward is Santa Fiora, where I lived much in childhood. Yonder, following to the west, is Belcaro—to my spirit a prayer made visible."

He paused, and tears rose to his eyes as he looked long at the building crowning the forest-covered ridge.

"Catherine changed it from a home of pleasure to a house of holiness," he resumed presently. "And there one very dear to me knew, as I trust, three years of peace and deepening purity before she passed to the land where wish and fulfilment are one." He sighed, and turned his face away. "There to the north," he ended a little abruptly, "you see the mountains of the Casentino. In those high places the holy Francis received the marks of the Passion of the Lord. I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills," he said.

"My Neri," asked de Frontaigne softly, laying his hand upon the other's knee, "is all well with you?"

Neri kept his eyes fixed on the far Casentino.

"All is as God wills—therefore all is well, Louis," he replied, with gentle reserve.

"I have travelled far for this hour," urged the other. "Let the truth, as ever, be between us."

Neri turned toward his friend. The rose-flush of sudden feeling had faded, and his face was as an alabaster lamp in which the flame was burning low. Behind his quiet, haunting memories of horror wavered—ghosts only, fleeting and faint—but ghosts not wholly exorcized.

"Mine was ever, as you know, the cry of the Psalmist," said he, speaking with an effort at tranquillity increasingly painful. "From my youth up Thy terrors have I suffered with a troubled mind. In truth, I may say, all Thy waves and Thy billows have gone over me. I have known—there have been——"

He stopped, then rallied, but turned away from his friend once more, and spoke rapidly, almost casually :

"I have been wholly out of myself," he said.

Louis' hand pressed more firmly on his knee ; the silence waited.

"Though He slay me, yet did I trust in Him!" cried Neri, and spoke more quietly.

"Through my delusion ran ever the old fear of my youth. All that to which my life was vowed seemed false. My mind was dark, and memory fails, but they tell me that I cried out to Pope Gregory on his deathbed, telling him that he did well to spurn Catherine, my mother—that she was a beguiler of the minds of men. Worse than that——"

He rose, and stretched out his arms cross-wise to the gleaming distance ; and its peace slowly entered his eyes.

"The cloud lifted," he said, "but it left me very still. I could not, Louis, write letters to my friends."

Religious melancholia, even more common in those days than in our own, was then generally regarded, perhaps less superficially than we think, not as delusion, but as experience charged with true meaning. The Cardinal de Frontaigne, arrayed in the delicate self-possession which was the treasured achievement of a lifetime, listened to his friend's avowals with respect. He himself contemplated the mysteries of life with insatiable interest, but was never racked to anguish by any of the dark problems which mental alertness longed to probe to the quick ; nor had his lucid and sincere nature ever for an instant lost sanity or poise. Yet in his friend's agonizing incertitudes Louis recognised the revelation of a character that pressed nearer than his own to the heart of the world, and felt its beatings more clearly.

He kept for a time the silence of sympathy ; when he spoke it was even with a touch of reverence.

"The cloud lifted," he said, "and now light bathes your soul as the sunset this outspread world ?"

"Confusion of mind did God lay on me from my childhood," said the hermit patiently ; "from confusion of mind I shall never be free."

The sweetness of Neri de' Pagliaresi had always possessed

the peculiar tonic quality of a mind to which bitterness and scorn were equally native, and which refrained from the ironic view of life, not by instinct of temperament, but by deliberate choice of will. Behind his stilled control the Cardinal discerned, as a quarter of a century before, a fiery and restless yearning. Desire seized on him to read the secrets of the gentle face more deeply ; nowhere in his wide knowledge of men had he noted a finer, more suggestive type of countenance than that of this recluse.

For many generations the Church had been patiently probing the hidden things of consciousness after a fashion undreamed of in Pagan times, and, as usual, the world was to reap the reward of her labours. A new motive and resource had dawned on society, and the extraordinarily vivid portraiture of the art of the Renaissance, emerging almost without warning from the hieratic art of earlier days, is but one witness among many to the zest with which man entered on the study of men. None felt this zest more keenly than Louis de Frontaigne. The scrutiny of character, not to purposes of edification, but as an end in itself, had been a ruling passion of his life.

"From confusion of mind I shall never be free," had said the hermit ; and the Cardinal queried :

"Then you have not yet seen the towers of the Holy City established on earth among the children of men ?"

Neri shook his head sadly : "I have no visions," said he.

"Nor I," remarked the other, "save as the spectacle of life is an ever-changing vision. Have you any idea, I wonder, of its interest and significance in these latter days ?"

"I chose my hermitage not too far from the spectacle you speak of," replied Neri, smiling. "Let me remind you again—Siena lies behind us. But you, who are of the larger world, do you see any signs of the kingdom of God on earth ?"

"I believe that kingdom was said not to come by observation," rejoined the other. "As I used to say to you, the variety of life is so endless that I, at least, dare never say, 'Here is the hand of God, and there is it withheld.' But if you refer, as I suppose, to the reform of the Church, and its

activity as an expression of the will of One All-Holy——" He made an expressive gesture.

"The schism has widened, bitterness is keener; the way of truth is more obscured than in the days of Catherine. The Church is a very scorn of men—and justly," said Neri, very peaceful. "I learn of these things from my friends, Don Stefano, General of the Carthusian Order, Master Raimondo, General of the Dominicans, and others who are in the thick of the struggle," he added.

The Cardinal eyed him curiously, and took up his tale:

"Meanwhile, in that larger revelation wherein, as I have always claimed, the meaning of life may be more fully read than in the extremely chequered record of the so-called religious world, wonderful things are stirring. Outwardly it is a time of pause, but to one sensitive to those finer impulses which prophesy the future a high excitement reigns. Where one man felt in our days at Avignon the longing to master the secrets of the ancient world, to-day hundreds seek and clamour. Others give themselves eagerly to the study of the laws of Nature; others, and many, possessed by the marvel of the human face and form, demand that the arts strike for themselves new roads. You have a young sculptor here in Siena, one Jacopo de' Quercia, who will glorify your city one day. By Bacchus! those who are young in Italy shall see great things."

"And poets?" asked Neri eagerly. "Do you know many who turn toward verse?"

De Frontaigne shook his head.

"Poetry lost much when she lost you, my Neri," said he a little ruefully. "Yet would you could feel as I feel the zest with which those new to life seek to wrest from the world all secrets of beauty and power! And chiefly here in Italy—here the production of noble thoughts is the work, not of solitude, but of society; here visible beauty and power quicken men to dream and to achieve."

"May it all be to the glory of God!" exclaimed the hermit fervently. His face had kindled. "But where in all this is the ancient battle for righteousness? The Italy I see is other than yours. Shall violence, cunning, greed,

then, reign unchecked, provided that science and the arts may flourish?"

"Eh, well"—Louis was evading, and he knew it—"you make, from what I hear, no special success at establishing righteousness here in Siena, where you are still content to paint Madonna as a graceful pattern on a background of gold instead of a breathing woman. Righteousness, I am inclined to think," he went on thoughtfully, "is best won by indirect means. Intellectual enlightenment, in which I include the æsthetic, is the most effective way of developing the race to the point where it will instinctively choose the morally noble. So thinks the philosopher Plato. Neri, I have read his Dialogues. The manuscripts of Petrarca—which are, as you know, in my hands—are no longer sealed to me! I have read; my thirsty spirit has fed at a divine source of refreshment and wisdom. I say with Plato, Let us refine the mind. A taste for violence and fraud will die out with other vulgarities."

Catholic Neri was hardly likely to accept this full neo-pagan doctrine.

"I am less versed than you in the appeal to history," he returned. "But should you say that periods in which the arts most flourished had been those of highest virtue? Perhaps the century on which we are just entering will prove me wrong in supposing the opposite. Perhaps the will of God, which I take to be simplicity and humility for the individual, honour and justice for the State, will be worked out by means of this new passion for beauty and knowledge."

"The will of God is wider than we know," said Louis de Frontaigne. And Cardinal and hermit fell a-musing.

Neri's face lightened slowly.

"Dear friend," he said with the old eagerness, laying his hand on the other's shoulder, "there is no division between us. Loyalty to truth is the central devotion of that Dominican school with which I am allied. Faith, so my blessed mother ever said, is the pupil of the intellectual eye; nor was she ever weary of bidding us open the eye of the

mind, that we might, by the light of truth, be set free from the shadows of confusion. She constantly urged intellectual clarity on me her unhappy son."

De Frontaigne had never been the man to accept an agreement only apparent.

"Ah!" he returned, "but your Dominicans—and Catherine—mean by truth other from what I mean. To me it is the sum total of knowledge to be gained by the dispassionate investigation of the material furnished us by this world; to her it was a direct mystical revelation of the Being of God, and of His will for men."

"And was not her truth, then, the nobler?" Neri asked gently.

"I am not sure," replied the Cardinal; and paused, reflecting.

"No!" he resumed presently—"no!" The longer I live, the more I mistrust the mystical impulse. It is irresistible, I grant, to him who experiences it; but in nine cases out of ten I cannot perceive that it is based on reason or justified by the course of events. Far be it from me to claim insight into the mind or will of the Higher Powers, if such there be; but the mystic certainly does not appear to me to read them correctly. Mysticism is for the individual; in his private relation with the Eternal Verities a man may practise this attitude as he will to the injury of none. Seek to apply it to the larger life of society, to realize its ideals for the community as a whole; it almost invariably proves to work against the wider ends which destiny has in view, and which mere worldly wisdom often furthers. Mysticism has led to the worst deceptions in history. The failure of the Church as an institution," concluded the Cardinal, "as compared with its indubitable power beneficently to control individual lives here and there, is evidence that I am right. Those who received a peculiar revelation made, not unnaturally, the attempt to foist it on humanity at large. They failed, and human nature being what it is, the reaction is what we see."

"From the beginning," interposed Neri, indignant, "the prophets and saints of God have proclaimed to men, among

all the tortuous ways of human thought, the straight and narrow way to the kingdom of righteousness."

De Frontaigne raised his eyebrows a trifle.

"Do you think," said he dispassionately, "that that is really so? Let us consider together the policy of your mother, Catherine, the purest type of Ecstatica it has ever been my fortune to see. In early youth she remained, as I understand, for some years in her cell. None could contradict her visions and revelations; they harmed no one, and were doubtless edifying and consoling to herself. She came forth —and to what result? A noble dream was in her heart: a pacified Christendom, a purified Church, a Pope the Father of his obedient people. These ends she worked for with singular vigour, along the lines of a policy which I gladly acknowledge to have been remarkably clear-cut for an illiterate woman to have planned—the return of the Pope to Italy, the deposition of unworthy officials, the organization of a crusade. This last was in particular a political idea of real value, aiming in several directions at once, as your true political ideas always do."

"I always cared for this feature of Catherine's thought less than for any other," Neri broke in.

"That," rejoined Louis calmly, "is because you are even more Utopian than she. But her whole scheme bore no relation to the destined march of events. At Avignon, as I pointed out to you years ago, she was only the tool of the unscrupulous. To outward seeming, she succeeded in a measure. Gregory, through her instrumentality in part, returned to Rome; his successor undertook the reform of the Church on much the lines Catherine desired. Did the political ends she gained secure in any degree the spiritual result for the sake of which she had aimed at them? Far better had the Popes remained at Avignon! If I am on the side of those you call the anti-Popes"—de Frontaigne, a little on the defensive, emphasized his words—"it is in part, at least, because I am honestly convinced, as I was you remember of old, that a decentralized Papacy is the best hope for civilization, and so for the Catholic Church. Theories aside, look at what occurred. Gregory died un-

reconciled to Italy, and cursing Catherine. Urban's harsh and ill-judged reforms precipitated a scandal that still continues. That scandal is undermining forever Catherine's ideal—and yours, my Neri—the ideal of one holy, visible Church under one God-appointed head. Such ideal is becoming untenable, except by an effort of imagination so violent that I confess I do not see how any sane mind can indulge in it. Be brave—face facts. There is no visible Church the abode of the Spirit of God—nay, more: I once considered the Church as a human institution indeed, but one necessary to the moral control of the race, and therefore to be upheld by the enlightened. Thanks in part to the labours of Catherine, I see quite differently now. The priesthood, to which I have the honour to belong—the whole ecclesiastical machine, in fact—suffused as it is with self-deceived mystical passion, and manipulated by worldly astuteness, appears to me a menace, which must some day be fought to the death by the servants of truth and liberty. I refrain from starting the fight," remarked the Cardinal, twirling the gem on his finger, "not, I trust, from motives of self-interest—though one can never be sure—but in part because a scholar like myself has rarely a taste for reform, and chiefly because the time is not ripe. But the conception of a visible Church under external authority is doomed. I cannot say how long this farce of a divided control may continue, what form the reaction may assume, what new forms of expression the religious impulse may find, more consistent with freedom and honesty. But the old yoke is discredited for ever, to the great advantage of mankind. Catherine, like all mystics, may have seen into the heavens, but she did not understand the conditions of her time; the cause to which she gave herself was rotten. I have wondered if she did not become dimly aware of the fact in her later years; if the recognition may have caused her death. Her life was failure."

"Her life was victory," said Neri very quiet.

Louis de Frontaigne looked at him curiously once more.

"I notice," said he, "that you are quite calm, where once you had been distressed. What I have said is certainly

shocking to you. Does the life of a hermit, perhaps, stupefy one a little? Does it render even a sensitive man indifferent to the progress of history, and the general welfare of mankind?"

Neri turned his clear gaze full on his friend. A smile overflowed his countenance. Louis de Frontaigne, for the first time in years, it may be, felt a sudden reviving humilty. A breath, as from some far land beyond his ken, seemed to reach his spirit.

"I have listened, Louis," the hermit said. "What you say is not new to me. Thus spoke my Delusion."

His eyes sought the tender sky, in which the light was fading.

"The Church of God!" he said slowly—"the Body of the Lord Christ! You think it does not exist. You see in its stead a vast organization to subdue mankind for its own ends, by force or fraud. Yet is Christ for ever lifted up upon the cross, that He may draw all men unto Him. Nails would not have held Him there had not love held Him; and they who love are nailed there by His side. Still His sacrifice endures, and still His faithful feed on it, that they may be one with it. Where is the sacrifice, there is the Church. Her foes are they of her own household, yet hidden among their crimes she lives. You say there is no visible Church; and I say that they who are one with Christ through the Sacrament of Unity, who with Him lay down their lives for the healing of the peoples, shall never perish from off the face of the earth. Their sacrifice is their Eucharist, their failure is victory, their dying is the life of the world."

'And what relation," asked Louis, "does this Church bear to the organization that we see? What are its limits, what its outward signs?"

"The universal body of all creatures who share the light of holy faith was Catherine's description," said Neri.

"Listen!" he added after a moment. "Because you are my friend and my spirit is knit to your own, I will repeat to you the passage in which, as it were in her last agony, she recorded for her spiritual father, Master Raimondo, the deep words which God spake to her soul."

He withdrew within himself for a moment. De Frontaigne looked abroad the while over the exquisite greens and silvers of low hills gently heaving into the far amethyst distances that stretched under the ashes of roses of the sky.

"'Thus said the Lord to a servant of His,'" recited Neri. "'Fear not, for I am He who is. Open the eye of thy mind and look upon My hands.' And I looked, and in His hands I saw held all the universal world. Then He said: 'For My Bride, the Church, I hung upon the Cross, nor shall she ever perish. For none can behold My beauty in the Abyss of the Trinity but by means of that Sweet Bride.'"

"Yes! Only through the Church may be attained the Perfect Vision; but the Church as the world must be redeemed!" the hermit continued with a touch of exaltation. "I no longer see it as a righteous society in the midst of evil. Nay, rather as poor struggling humanity, for ever sinning, failing, yet saved forever so long as the Cross endures. And this one thing I know," he added solemnly: "The Church is in some sense visible and permanent, and the altars on which we do show forth the Lord's death till He come are necessary to the life of Christendom. I find it not difficult," he resumed after a brief pause, "to believe with you that the Spirit reveals Himself to man in every working of the human intellect. He who Is must be manifest in all true forms of being. He is to be found in the life of Nature; but I believe that He may also be found, and more fully, in the life of grace—in the transforming force that touches the springs of deeper than moral being. Who that knows and sees can deny that there are men and women who, even while imprisoned in the sense, have the immediate vision of what is beyond sense? What matter their errors of judgment? What though they predict wrongly the course of events? Our intellectual perceptions are not to me, as to you, the ultimate expression of ourselves. There is something deeper, truer. Sacrifice, not vision, is the strength of the Church; but the vision that leads to sacrifice can never lead astray. Let the desire of men be one with God's desire; their action, though it move by ways abhorrent to our blindness, can but aid His holy will."

Fret and unrest had left the upturned face, and the look of expectation, which never left it, was hushed to noble calm. Louis de Frontaigne, from whose face all spiritual expectation had died out, eyed him wistfully.

"You have what I have not," he sighed; and the two were silent. But presently the Cardinal broke forth:

"What a circle it is!" he cried bitterly. "It is true—more true than in past years—that in your presence I feel abashed and confounded, as by one whose hold on life is firmer than my own; yet you seek and do not find. You lean on authority, and none is clear to you; cling to the visible Church, and cannot tell me where it is, nor what. Your life nourishes itself on dream, and not even dream of your own, for you say aright—there is no vision in your eyes. Yet, leaving you, the wisdom of the world wherein I take my solace can comfort me no more. It is a pastime that passes away. God knows, if God there be, that I have sought the true and fled the false, yet the truth for ever eludes me, and I find it in the heart of you, who by your own confession live at two removes from the reality in which you believe. Beneath the calm wherein I have encased my soul, there is a longing that consumes me without end."

Neri made with deep solemnity the sign of the Cross on forehead and breast.

"Adoramus Te, Criste, quia per crucem tuam redemisti mundum," he murmured. "By Thy Cross and Passion, deliver us from confusion of mind. But if it be Thy will that we live therein, grant that our desire, in the darkness, may be drawn to Thy desire till they be one thing together."

He turned upon his friend a face full of loving compassion.

"Catherine, too, knew the ceaseless, restless pangs of longing," he said after a moment. "But beneath her pain was peace. What can I say? In her presence one felt oneself near to the source of life. Gladness was there, however bitter her sufferings; calm, however fierce the conflict without and within. Close to Catherine"—the hermit spoke under his breath—"one understood how in God all the sorrow and yearning of the universe exists for ever, while yet God is completeness and joy. You may say what you

will. The witnessing saints are the power of the Church: I am not of them," concluded the hermit sadly, "I am but their disciple. Yet, though mine eyes be holden, I walk all my days in the light of the countenance of those whose faces see God. They are like the stars of the heaven for number, and new stars are for ever rising to lighten the ages as they pass." He lifted his brow. "I who have not seen, yet have believed," said he.

The friends gazed in silence over wide space, from which the sense of earth was vanishing fast, in the twilight. But as the lower world lost substance and ceased to interest, the glory of the heavens was revealed. In the blue dusk of the sky—a hue softer, deeper than by day—shone faintly brightening, innumerable points of silver.

A youthful figure emerged from the shadow of that grim structure, the Porta Romana, and began to climb presently the brief ascent towards Neri's cave. As he drew near, Louis could see that he was robed in the Franciscan habit.

"He who comes is my friend," said Neri, rising to greet him. "My friend and the dear son of my heart. Let me present to the Cardinal de Frontaigne, Brother Bernardino Albizzeschi."

The young man inclined his head without speaking. In the faint light de Frontaigne saw a face of rare delicacy and distinction. The lips were stern, but dreams lived in the eyes.

"Brother Bernadino was born in the year in which Catherine Benincasa changed her life," said Neri. "I think her spirit was upon him from the first."

"It is from you that I have chiefly learned concerning that most lucid spirit, dear my father," said the young man. "And of how many others the same is true!"

His voice was yet more remarkable than his face, so clear were the tones, so individual, so instinct with latent power.

"His Excellency has perhaps come hither, drawn by the fame of your writings?" he inquired.

Neri laughed, and, if his hair was white, the laugh was merry and musical as ever.

"Of those great writings, I think his Excellency has never

heard," mocked he; nor was de Frontaigne able to contradict him.

"No?" cried the younger man, evidently a little aggrieved. "But I assure you, monsignore, that the lauds of Messer Raniero are sung not only in Siena, but throughout Italy. Also, his translation of the "Life of Sister Catherine" is making that holy soul known to hundreds of readers unable to read the story in the Latin of Master Raimondo of Capua."

"My son," said Messer Raniero gently, "you, who covet naught of earthly fame for yourself, as well I know, must learn a like indifference for your friends. Monsignore remains to say the Office with us; you will then conduct him to harbourage in Siena."

The grotto, as they entered, appeared a more spacious spot than De Frontaigne had supposed. Rude masonry had come to the help of Nature in the arching of the roof; the cave was simply but adequately provided for human habitation. These things he noted by degrees as Brother Bernardino lit one by one the lights upon the rude altar which filled the natural apse at the end of the cavern. As he drew near he saw the one possession of the eremite—a solemn altar-picture, dim and blue, like the tone of the Tuscan landscape in the gathering dusk. In the centre rose the Crucified, uplifted high; while on a distant hill the angel with the flaming sword drove man from Paradise. But on a similar hill to the right the Lord ascended into glory, while around the Cross saints stood or knelt in rapt devotion, bearing the instruments of penance. She who knelt in the centre was a Dominican, and in her lifted hands were seen the marks of the Passion of the Lord. The signature was "Andrea Vanni." "O Crux Ave, Spes Unica," ran the inscription in golden letters below.

"Sæpe repugnaverunt me a juventute mea; eterim non potuerunt mihi," Brother Bernardino was chanting.

And Neri's beloved voice took up the chant:

"Sustinuit anima mea in verbo ejus: speravit anima mea in Domino."

And very humbly, like a little child, the Cardinal sang with hermit and friar, finding for the moment a higher

beauty in confession, prayer, and praise than art or letters could furnish. The wisdom of this world would, as well he knew, claim him again on the morrow; for to-night it had slipped from his spirit like a garment, and he felt himself encompassed by a wider purity and a more enduring life.

THE END

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